

The Impact of Politics and Personalities on Conservative Education Policies, 1976-1997

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ABSTRACT

This thesis offers a detailed examination of aspects of Conservative education policies between 1976 and 1997. While developments during this period generated considerable amounts of contemporary discussion and analysis, this is the first historical study to cover the period as a whole. Drawing on a series of interviews with many of the participants, particular attention is paid to the two major developments that affected schools during the period - the introduction of a national curriculum and Grant Maintained schools.

After an introduction that includes a discussion of the methodology, the typology used within the thesis, and a related literature review, the thesis follows a narrative structure in analysing the course of Conservative education policies between 1976 and 1997. Both the origins and the context of how the various policies emerged are discussed and analysed, as well as how and why there was a radical break with the previous pattern of educational policy making and discussion.

The two issues that characterise the period are the politicisation of the policy-making process, and the consequences of that politicisation on implementing the actual policies. Attention is drawn to the increasing encroachment of politics and ideology into the field of education during the 1970s and 1980s, and how this encroachment created a new 'space' between policy proposals and practice. While this development was responsible for the political triumph of the 1988 Education Reform Act, it proved less successful in translating that triumph into a sustainable and coherent set of policies during the implementation stage.

The process of politicisation had introduced a degree of interference by individual politicians and their advisers that was a new development in the field of education policy, and it is argued that the conflicts generated by this over-dependence and over-reliance on individuals to make decisions about education policy, rather than ideological incoherence or bureaucratic or professional opposition, was the primary factor that adversely affected the course of Conservative education reforms.

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Finally, this thesis is dedicated to Aisling, Shannon and DW – *God's Gifts*.

Daniel Callaghan

March 2004

DECLARATION

I declare that the work contained within this thesis is my own work.

The word count of this thesis is 78554.

Daniel Callaghan, March 2004

ABBREVIATIONS

APS	Assisted Places Scheme
ASI	Adam Smith Institute
CPS	Centre for Policy Studies
CTC	City Technology College
DES	Department of Education and Science (until 1992)
DfE	Department for Education (until 1994)
DfEE	Department for Education and Employment
ESG	Education Study Group (at the CPS)
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education
HMI	Her Majesty's Inspectorate
IEA	Institute of Economic Affairs
LEA	Local Education Authority
NCC	National Curriculum Council
NCES	National Council for Educational Standards
NTBG	No Turning Back Group of Conservative MPs
SAU	Social Affairs Unit
SEAC	Schools Examination and Assessment Council
TES	Times Educational Supplement
THES	Times Higher Education Supplement
TGAT	Task Group on Assessment and Testing

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Digby Anderson	Director, Social Affairs Unit, since 1980
Jennifer Bacon	Under Secretary, School Curriculum and Exams, DES, 1986-89
Kenneth Baker	Secretary of State for Education, 1986-89
Mike Baker	BBC Education Correspondent, 1988-present
Robert Balchin	Chairman, Grant Maintained Schools Foundation, 1989-1998
Michael Barber	Head of the Standards and Effectiveness Unit, DfEE, 1997-2001
John Barnes	London School of Economics
Tessa Blackstone	Minister of State, DFEE, 1997-2001; Opposition Spokesman , House of Lords on education and science, 1988-92
Emily Blatch	Minister of State, DFEE, 1992-94
Eric Bolton	Senior Chief Inspector of Schools, 1983-1991
Rhodes Boyson	Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Education, 1979-83; member of NCES, FEVER, Black Paper author/editor
John Caines	Permanent Secretary, DFE, 1989-93
Mark Carlisle	Secretary of State for Education, 1979-1981
John Clare	Education editor, <i>The Daily Telegraph</i> since 1988; Education correspondent, <i>The Times</i> , 1986-88;
Kenneth Clarke	Secretary of State for Education, 1990-1992
Elizabeth Cotterell	Special Adviser to Gillian Shephard, 1992-1997
Caroline Cox	Chair CPS Education Study Group; member of the Hillgate Group; Director of the CPS, 1983-85
Robert Dunn	Parliamentary Under Secretary, DES, 1983-88
Michael Fallon	Parliamentary Under Secretary, DES, 1990-92; Member of the No Turning Back Group
David Forrester	Assistant Secretary, DES, 1979-1985; Under Secretary DES/DFEE 1988-1994; Director of Further Education and Youth Training 1995-2001
Eric Forth	Parliamentary Under Secretary of State, 1992-94, DFE; Minister of State, DFEE, 1994-97; Member of the No Turning Back Group
Duncan Graham	Chairman and Chief Executive, National Curriculum Council, 1988- 1991
Cliff Grantham:	Special Adviser to John Patten, 1991-95
Brian Griffiths	Head of Humber Ten Policy Unit, 1985-1990; Chairman and Chief Executive, Schools Examination and Assessment Council, 1991- 1993
Phillip Halsey	Chairman and Chief Executive, Schools Examination and Assessment Council, 1988-1991
James Hamilton	Permanent Secretary, DES, 1976-83
David Hancock	Permanent Secretary, DES, 1983-89
John Hedger	Under Secretary, DES, 1988-92; Deputy Secretary, DFE, 1992-95; Director of Operations, DFEE, 1995-2000
Peter Hennessey	Professor of Government, Queen Mary and Westfield College
Geoffrey Holland	Permanent Secretary, DFE, 1993-94
Keith Joseph	Secretary of State for Education, 1981-1986
Tony Kerpel	Special Adviser to Kenneth Baker, 1985-1992

Tessa Keswick	Special Adviser to Kenneth Clarke, 1989-95; Director Centre for Policy Studies, 1995-present
Eleanor Laing	Special Adviser to John MacGregor, 1989-94
Sheila Lawlor	Chair of Politeia since; Deputy Director of the Centre for Policy Studies, 1987-89
Denis Lawton	Professor of Education, Institute of Education
Oliver Letwin	Special Adviser to Keith Joseph 1982-83; Member of the Policy Unit 1983-86
John MacGregor	Secretary of State for Education, 1989-1990
John Major	Prime Minister, 1990-1997
John Marks	Secretary to the CPS Education Study Group; member of the Hillgate Group; member of NCC, SEAC, SCAA
Dominic Morris	Prime Minister's Private Office, 1988-92; Downing Street Policy Unit 1993-96
Peter Owen	Deputy Secretary, School Curriculum and Teachers, DFEE, 1994-95; Director General for Schools, DFEE, 1995-98
John Patten	Secretary of State for Education, 1992-1994
Madsen Pirie	President of the Adam Smith Institute, since 1978
Dennis O'Keeffe	Professor of Social Policy, Buckingham University; Social Affairs Unit and Adam Smith Institute author
Angela Rumbold	Minister of State, DES, 1986-90; Member of the No Turning Back Group
Conor Ryan	Special Adviser to David Blunkett, 1995-2001
Clive Saville	Under Secretary DFE, 1987-97
Stuart Sexton	Special Adviser to Norman St John Stevas (1977-79), Mark Carlisle (1979-81) & Sir Keith Joseph, 1981-86 ; Director of the Education Unit at the Institute of Economic Affairs 1986-92
Gillian Shephard	Secretary of State for Education, 1994-1997
Robert Skidelsky	President of the Social Market Foundation; Professor of Political Economy at Warwick University; Member of Schools Examination and Assessment Authority, 1992-93
Nick Stuart	Under Secretary, DES, 1981-87; Deputy Secretary DES/DFE 1989-1993
Nicholas Tate	Chief Executive, Qualifications and Curriculum Authority 1997-2000
Cyril Taylor	Chairman, Specialist Schools Trust (formerly Technology Colleges Trust) since 1987; Member, Bd. Of Directors , Centre for Policy Studies, 1984-2000
Margaret Thatcher	Prime Minister, 1979-1990
Nicholas True	Deputy Director Downing Street Policy Unit, 1991-1995; Special Adviser, Prime Minister's Office, 1995-97
Walter Ulrich	Deputy Secretary, DES, 1976-89
John Vereker	Deputy Secretary, DES/DFE, 1988-93
Geoff Whitty	Director, Institute of Education since 2000
Peter Wilby	Education Editor, <i>The Independent</i> , 1986-89; Editor, <i>New Statesman</i> since 1998
Sean Williams	Downing Street Policy Unit, 1995-97

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Research questions

The author's intention is to investigate the course of Conservative education policies towards schools between 1976 and 1997, particularly relating to the impact of key personalities who were involved, and the political and policy context in which they operated. With the 1988 Education Reform Act acting very much as the 'hinge' of the period in question, this study addresses important questions about the educational policy-making process between 1976 and 1997. Those traditionally involved in education policy displayed similar characteristics to the 'village' or 'policy' community that Heclo and Wildavsky described in their 1974 study of the Treasury. Much depended upon 'the personal relationships between major political and administrative actors – sometimes in conflict, often in agreement, but always in touch and operating within a shared framework'.¹ Within this community, power and influence was seen as diffused, albeit not always equally, between central government, local government and individual institutions. From at least 1976 there was a shift away from this model, culminating in a radical break in the lead up to the 1987 election. How much strain was that model under, internally and externally, prior to 1979? What model of policy making replaced the tripartite community model? How effective was this model in providing new policies? How did these policies 'emerge'? Who were the participants in the process and how was power and influence distributed among them? What role remained for the previous 'partners'?

In the post-1988 period, other questions emerge. Despite the apparent triumph of 1987, key policies failed to achieve the ambitions of their political sponsors. Nowhere was this more evident than in the case of the twin pillars of the 1988 Education Reform Act, the introduction of a national curriculum and Grant Maintained schools. As described in one study, 'By 1991, the National

¹ Heclo, H. and Wildavsky, A. (1974) *The Private Government of Public Money*. London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., p. xv.

Curriculum was undergoing implementation and revision simultaneously'.² By 1997, following an unbroken series of controversies and revisions, culminating in the test boycott by teachers in 1993, the National Curriculum, introduced with such fanfare in 1988, was largely discredited and effectively off limits for the then Conservative government. The parallel attempt to transform the organisational structure of the schools system through the introduction of Grant Maintained schools had petered out, with only just over a thousand schools having become Grant Maintained, the majority of those having done so during the first few years of the initiative. How was it that successive Conservative governments were unable to achieve greater success in such key areas of education reform? How much did the changing personnel involved in education policy affect the progress of education policies after 1988? Can we trace a 'cause and effect' factor to the period prior to 1988? Why was there such a destructive cloud of ambiguity and confusion surrounding the course of Conservative education reforms to such an extent that key policies began to falter almost as soon as they were introduced? Can ideological ambiguities alone provide sufficient explanation? Was there a reassertion of power by the traditional 'partners', and if so, did this entail a 'hijacking' or 'subversion' of some policies as claimed in some quarters? Are there any continuing issues or concerns for current or future administrations apparent from the experiences of the Thatcher and Major administrations?

While many of the policy proposals in this period emerged from outside the traditional educational policy-making community, some, such as the National Curriculum, were already on the educational agenda. What was different, however, was that *all* policy proposals were increasingly taken on board and mediated by politicians. In terms of the degree of intervention and interest by politicians, this was a new phenomenon. One stimulus behind this was the insularity to change of many within the existing policy community. One consequence of this was the temporary displacement of that policy community, with little conscious effort to replace it with any alternative model. Another related consequence was the creation of a new additional 'space' between

² Willan, P. (1995) 'The National Curriculum: the natural evolutionary product of two decades of debate and development? Or a device for keeping the world Tory?' University of London: Ph.D. thesis, p. 36.

proposals and practice. This was a 'space' that was, inevitably, highly politicised, and which unsurprisingly led to the charge from some quarters of the 'politicisation' of the policy process or of education in general. Education had always been political. It was just that the politicians never took much interest in it. This study, of how the conflict between those interests that occupied this new 'space' – political, ideological and bureaucratic – affected the course of education reform, provides an analysis that challenges existing accounts. While full use has been made of the available published sources, this thesis also incorporates an invaluable and untapped range of oral sources, based upon interviews with many of the participants and observers.

Methodology and Sources

(a) Narrative of progress

This investigation arose out of an earlier study for a Master's Degree between 1992 and 1994 that examined the influence of a small group of right-wing activists associated with the 1988 Education Act. Drawing on the data from a series of five interviews, as well as published sources, the conclusion of that study was that those individuals, dubbed 'The believers', had a disproportionate influence on aspects of the 1988 Act.³ After a break of four years from study, the author picked up the thread of that conclusion to carry out further research into how much influence the broader spectrum of New Right groups were able to exert on the course of education policy in general, during the period of the Conservative administrations. Although a fascinating portrait of the 'sub-culture' of pressure groups, think tanks and advisers, and the influence they believed they had, emerged when gathering the data, other questions began to overtake the original stimulus for investigation.

While it appeared from the initial data that at certain points and at certain times during the policy process, these groups may have had a strong *directional* influence, this was not necessarily a determining influence. This posed the questions as to whom possessed, and where exactly, could this determining

³ Callaghan, D. (1994) 'The Believers. Politics and Personalities in the making of the 1988 Education Act'. University of London, M.Sc. dissertation. An edited version of the dissertation was published in *History of Education*, Vol. 24, No. 4, December 1995. pp. 363-385.

influence be located. A parallel course of inquiry was that while the earlier study had concluded with the apparent political and ideological triumph of the 1988 Education Reform Act, the feeling was very different immediately post-1997 after the drift and bitterness apparent during Gillian Shephard's time as Secretary of State. For the Conservatives, education policy had become almost a liability in electoral terms. Significant policies had failed to make the impact hoped for. The 1997 manifesto proposals, heavily influenced by John Major, which focussed on a return to grammar schools and selection, displayed an atavism and regressiveness that many of his own colleagues found irrelevant.⁴ This further demonstrated the sense of frustration and wasted opportunities during the preceding years. Recrimination was in the air. As the focus of investigation shifted to include what might have gone wrong for the Conservatives, further data began to be gathered, looking at a broader swathe of literature, and a much broader sample of people, including officials and politicians. Eventually, a total of 49 interviews were completed, the last of which took place in April 2002.

Initially, no clear picture emerged. The Labour politician Aneurin Bevan once remarked how, in his elusive search for the locus of 'power', every time he thought he had arrived at the right place, always he 'saw its coat-tails disappearing round the corner'.⁵ So it proved initially when trying to find the answers to some of the research questions. Part of the challenge in contextualising and analysing the data was the relative fragmentation of the existing data. While there are numerous studies of particular initiatives or particular aspects of the period under investigation, no single account of the entire period was available. While various other studies have examined aspects of Conservative education policies between 1976 and 1997, this is the first full-length study of the period as a whole. To provide the backbone or chronology, the two most useful publications were the weekly *Times Educational Supplement* (*TES*) and the journal *Education*,⁶ with the former, in particular, being influential

⁴ 'The 97 manifesto was awful. John Major's version of his 1950s black and white movie'. Michael Fallon interview, 17 February 1998.

⁵ Morgan, K. (1987) *Labour People. Leaders and Lieutenants: Hardie to Kinnock*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 205.

⁶ *Education* ceased publication in 1996.

in its own right, 'both a chronicler and persuasive shaper of events'.⁷ The broadsheet newspapers also provided solid reporting from a slightly different perspective to that of the 'trade' journals. John Clare, in the *Daily Telegraph*, proved the most interesting and informative of the education correspondents. This was not only for the access to Conservative politicians he enjoyed, but also for his fiercely independent and thoughtful analysis of education issues, regardless of their political origins. Various tabloid newspapers, especially the *Daily Mail*, although suffering from predictability in their approach, were also useful for insights into the mind-sets or tactics of those who provided the stories, more often than for the stories themselves.

Some published studies were particularly helpful, though for differing reasons, when looking at certain periods. Clyde Chitty's *Towards a New Education System* and Christopher Knight's *The Making of Tory Education Policy in Post-War Britain* were most often returned to for the period up to the mid-1980s, as was Brian Simon's *Education and the Social Order*.⁸ Unsurprisingly, there was a 'bulge' of publications on events during the late 1980s, the most useful of which were Stephen Ball's *Politics and Policy Making in Education* and Richard Johnson's *Education Limited*. Apart from Denis Lawton's *The Tory Mind on Education* and *Education and Politics in the 1990s*, that decade has not been well served with publications.⁹ Kenneth Clarke's two biographers, Malcolm Balen and Andy McSmith, provide some useful background to his time at education, while Mike Baker's *Who Rules Our Schools?* is excellent on John Patten's time.¹⁰ Anthony Seldon's political biography of John Major is essential for much of the 1990s. A less substantial work, but a good introduction to the rancorousness of the later Major years, is

⁷ Davies-Griffith, C.C. (1999) 'Developments in the making of policy in education in the twentieth century: the 1902, 1918, 1944 and 1988 Education Acts'. University of Birmingham: Ph.D. thesis, p. 28.

⁸ Chitty, C. (1989) *Towards a New Education System. The Victory of the New Right*. Lewes: The Falmer Press; Knight, C. (1990) *The Making of Tory Education Policy in Post-War Britain 1950-1986*. Lewes: Falmer Press; Simon, B. (1991) *Education and the Social Order 1940-1990*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

⁹ Ball, S. (1990) *Politics and Policy Making in Education*. London: Routledge; Johnson, R. (1991) *Education Limited*. London: Unwin Hyman Ltd.; Lawton, D. (1992) *Education and Politics in the 1990s. Conflict or Consensus?* Lewes: Falmer Press; Lawton, D. (1994) *The Tory Mind on Education. 1979-94*. London: The Falmer Press.

Hywel Williams' *Guilty Men*.¹¹ Butler and Kavanagh's election series provided a moving snapshot of political and psephological analysis, while various academic education journals punctuated the study with useful insights and arguments on various aspects of policy. On the dangers and opportunities of interpreting and using qualitative data, McPherson and Raab's introduction to their *Governing Education* was useful, as indeed were contributions in edited volumes by Walford, *Researching the Powerful in Education*, and Halpin and Troyna's *Researching Educational Policy*.¹² In particular, Stephen Ball's warnings and admonitions regarding the use of oral sources in his contributions to these latter studies were also ever present, if not entirely heeded.

(b) Typology

In gathering, organising and presenting the data, a particular thread or typology appeared to run through the period 1976 to 1997. Writing in 1984, Denis Lawton identified three competing groups within the central authority in the education system. These groups he identified as the 'politicos (ministers, political advisers, etc.), bureaucrats (DES officials) and the professionals (HMI)'.¹³ Lawton put forward his proposal in the wake of increased activity and attempted intervention by the DES and HMI in the curriculum, but prior to the intense period of political lobbying that eventually led to the 1988 Reform Act, which brought new pressures and new interests into play. Adapting Lawton's typology, it might be suggested that the individuals or interests, who between them comprised the main determinants on the course of education policy in this new expanded arena or space, can also be divided into three groups. These could be described as the *irregulars*, the *regulars* and the *politicos*, with the competition and conflict

¹⁰ Balen, M. (1994) *Kenneth Clarke*. London: Fourth Estate; McSmith, A. (1994) *Kenneth Clarke, A Political Biography*. London: Verso; Baker, M. (1994) *Who Rules Our Schools?* London: Hodder & Stoughton.

¹¹ Seldon, A. (1997) *John Major: A Political Life*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson; Williams, H. (1998) *Guilty Men*. London: Aurum Press.

¹² McPherson, A. and Raab, C. (1988) *Governing Education*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press; Walford, G. (ed.) (1994) *Researching the Powerful in Education*. London: UCL Press; Halpin, D. and Troyna, B. (1994) (eds.) *Researching Education Policy: Ethical and Methodological Issues*. London: Falmer Press.

¹³ Lawton, D. (1984) *The Tightening Grip. Growth of Central Control of the School Curriculum*. London: Institute of Education, p. 16.

between these three groupings providing the context in which policies were developed and implemented.

The *irregulars* comprised a fluid combination of pressure groups, think tanks and advisers once completely outside the traditional loop of educational policy making. Membership of this group was clearly linked to certain roles or positions held by individuals, but a more useful criteria was *attitudinal*, rather than positional. Operating within an ad hoc system, using what one participant described as ‘a loose nexus of individuals, linked by friendship and association’,¹⁴ they did not see themselves as in any way part of the ‘educational establishment’, which they distrusted, and their constituency was the ‘consumers’ of education – parents, children and, occasionally, employers. The *regulars* were generally professionals working within the education system, primarily DES officials, with an occasional supporting cast for others such as HMI, and also increasingly the majority of the members in the newly-created education quangos that proliferated in the wake of the 1988 Act. Secretaries of State, their advisers, junior ministers and both Margaret Thatcher and John Major comprise the *politicos*.

With a rapid turnover of actors within the ranks of the *irregulars*, *regulars* and *politicos*, existing secondary accounts can only fill so much of the gap in our understanding of educational change during the Conservative administrations of the 1980s and 1990s. There are few first-hand sources available in the public domain. An application was made to the Departmental Record Officer at the Department for Education and Skills requesting ‘privileged access’ to the departmental papers covering the period. These have not, as yet, been passed on to the National Archive and would subsequently be subject to a 30-year closure. The papers from the National Curriculum Council (NCC) and the School Examinations and Assessment Council (SEAC) were passed onto the National Archive in 1997, with the former subject to a 10 year closure, and the latter subject to a 30 year closure. Thus, with much of what occurred during the period still very much in the realm of contemporary history, we are largely left with a combination of textual analysis and reportage.¹⁵ While

¹⁴ John Barnes quoted in Knight, C. (1990) *The Making of Tory Education Policy in Post War Britain 1950-1986*. Lewes: The Falmer Press, p. 98.

¹⁵ See for example, Simon, *Education and the Social Order* and Johnson, *Education Limited*.

the public accounts that are available, such as policy studies, memoirs, Hansard and media reports, are important to this study, the primary investigative tool used for this thesis was the interview.

(c) Using Oral Sources

Gathering and using first-hand oral accounts, particularly elite accounts, raises a number of methodological issues. One of the most obvious potential pitfalls in adopting such an approach was described by Fernand Braudel. Braudel suggested that there were different kinds of historical ‘time’, and that ‘time moves at different speeds’, operating at different levels. At the top level were political events where things happened quickly if unevenly. These events were merely ‘surface disturbances, crests of foam that the tides of history carry on their strong backs’. The ‘tides of history’ operated at a different level, at a different speed, and were the ‘slow moving social and economic trends, often imperceptible to contemporaries. . . social structure and state systems’.¹⁶ In using oral sources as a methodological tool, Ball warned against the dangers of being seduced by those more closely involved with these ‘surface disturbances’, suggesting that although the purposes and intentions of political actors were important, they could not provide ‘a sufficient basis for the interpretation of policies and policy making’.¹⁷ While it was obvious that the ‘tides of history’ - economic, social, educational and political - were also flowing strongly during the period under investigation, and are equally deserving of studies regarding their impact on education policy, they do not tell the whole story. Perhaps more so than any other period in the history of British education, the period between 1976 and 1997 cannot be fully explained, nor understood, without placing the impact of elite politics and personalities centre stage.

Once the hurdle of obtaining access to the desired interviewees had been accomplished, the course and content of the interview itself also required careful consideration. The word that best described the whole process of interviewing is ‘manipulation’. From one perspective, the interviewer must quickly respond to

¹⁶ Braudel in Evans, R. (1997) *In Defence of History*. London: Granta Books, p. 154.

¹⁷ Ball, S. ‘Researching Inside the State: Issues in the Interpretation of Elite Interviews’, in Halpin and Troyna, *Researching Education Policy*, p. 108.

the expectations and assumptions of the interviewee. Ball noted how, in some interviews, he would deliberately present himself 'as more or less knowledgeable or more or less naive as seemed tactically appropriate'.¹⁸ Gewirtz and Ozga described how they did not threaten the self-confidence of their interviewees: 'We were informed, interested and to a certain degree cast by our informants in the role of audience'.¹⁹ With regard to the interviewee, Ozga noted that her particular interviewees 'were all capable, active and engaged with education, even in retirement, and were very aware of their place in the narrative that they constructed'.²⁰ This self-conscious 'self-presentation' can clearly distort individual roles and motivations, something that is particularly acute when interviewing politicians who are likely to be practised in the art of managing an interview and, in all probability, considerably more practised than most researchers. Yet to contradict elements of any oral or indeed written recollections is not necessarily to suggest that the interviewees or authors were in any sense being deliberately misleading, or were not recounting the objective truth as they saw it. Phillip Williams described how interviewees can respond with what he described as 'honest opinions mistakenly held'.²¹ This does, however, increase the potential for the interviewer being misled. If there is no conscious effort to mislead, this can make the recollection all the more convincing. The interview data from one individual thus need to be correlated as far as possible by accounts from other sources, including the perspective of other individuals on the same aspect of policy.

While this can go some way towards minimizing the possibility of distortion on the part of the interviewee, the possibility of distortion can also arise in the case of the interviewer. According to Gardner, an oral history interview has 'an inescapably dialogical character', whereby the emergence of

¹⁸ Ball, S. 'Political interviews and the politics of interviewing', in Walford (ed.), *Researching the Powerful in Education*, p. 99.

¹⁹ Gewirtz, S. and Ozga, J. 'Interviewing the education policy elite', in Walford (ed.), *Researching the Powerful in Education*, p. 193.

²⁰ Ozga, J. (2000) *Policy Research in Educational Settings: Contested Terrain*. Buckingham: Open University Press, p. 126.

²¹ Williams quoted in Seldon, A. and Pappworth, J. (1982) *By Word of Mouth*. London: Methuen, p. 18.

testimony is the result of ‘a joint product of conversational exchange’.²² In preparing for and participating in this ‘conversational exchange’, the interviewer will also bring their own personal and professional baggage and body of opinions to the interview. There is often a thesis to be proved or disproved, or if the starting point of a study is a predetermined model of behaviour, there is also the danger of addressing, or only following through, on responses that support the prejudices of the interviewer.

Despite these methodological concerns, the use of oral history has an independent validity vis-à-vis other methodologies. ‘Oral history’, wrote Paul Thompson, ‘can be a means for transforming both the content and the purpose of history. It can be used to change the focus of history itself, and open up new areas of inquiry’.²³ The original starting point for this study was a line from Richard Johnson’s *Education Limited*. In his description of how the original voucher concept was unpacked after 1983 into the various elements that found their way into the 1988 Act, Johnson makes skilful use of contemporary reporting in the media to weave an account of what might have happened. In addressing the possible influence of individuals such as Oliver Letwin, Bob Dunn and Stuart Sexton, particularly on Mrs Thatcher, Johnson posed the question ‘Had she grasped the Dunn-Sexton-Letwin point?’ Given the inaccessibility of Mrs Thatcher, it seemed a good idea to try to answer that question by asking Dunn et al. what their opinions were, and correlate them with what was already known or conjectured.²⁴ The use of oral evidence from sources such as these can, as described by Anthony Seldon, ‘be particularly effective in supplying information about relationships, because how relationships function in practice is often very different from how they are supposed to work’.²⁵ Such information, according to another historian, ‘does not get into official records’.²⁶

²² Gardner, P. (2003) ‘Oral history in education: teacher’s memory and teachers’ history’. *History of Education*, Vol. 32, No. 2, p. 176.

²³ Thompson, P. (1978) *The Voice of the Past. Oral History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 2.

²⁴ Johnson, *Education Limited*, p. 61. In a slightly similar vein, Heclo and Wildavsky had suggested that ‘The cure for ignorance about how something gets done is to talk with those who do it’. Heclo and Wildavsky, *Private Government of Public Money*, p. xiii.

²⁵ Seldon and Pappworth, *By Word of Mouth*, p. 39.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

(d) Gathering and using the data

While the researcher is likely to be in control of how and when secondary sources are reviewed, this is not the case with interviews. For part-time students, there is the added difficulty of simply accommodating the time and location which interviewees make available alongside domestic and work commitments. While gaining access to the interviewees did not generally prove as difficult as anticipated, a more acute problem was not being able to schedule the interviews in such a way as to provide the most effective sequence for gathering the data. This did not invalidate any of the data, but opportunities were missed to follow particular lines of questioning.

Those interviewed fell roughly into the three categories already identified: *politicos*, *regulars* and *irregulars*. Some individuals fall into more than one category, while some commentators and academics, interviewed to provide an additional perspective are not intended to fall into any. Only one interviewee requested the questions in advance, and none embargoed any area or type of questions. All were happy to be quoted except where they so indicated during the course of the interview. The first interviews were those conducted for the earlier study in 1994, with a final total of 49 interviews, a figure which includes two individuals who were interviewed twice. Inevitably, there were some individuals who were unavailable or unwilling to be interviewed. These are indicated in the bibliography. Twenty-eight interviews were conducted in the interviewees' place of work, eight each in the House Of Commons and in the interviewees' home, three in the Education Department, one in my place of work and one through correspondence. The length of the interviews varied from half an hour to just under four hours.

The approach adopted towards the interviews themselves was very much as described by Sidney and Beatrice Webb, that of 'a conversation with a purpose'.²⁷ Each interview was the subject of meticulous preparation with specific questions and areas to be covered. As with the experiences of other researchers, the tone and sequence of the interview had to mould itself to the responses of the interviewee. Significant attention was given, both in preparing

the questions and during the course of the interview, to what Daniel McHugh refers to as ‘ “the sociology of the interview”: knowing enough of the insider’s semantics, and yet having an outsider’s detachment’.²⁸ Some questions, generally the opening ones, were deliberately non-contentious in order to put the interviewee at ease. This was perhaps of particular importance with officials, and also provided the opportunity to obtain a sense of whether the interviewees were willing to be more forthcoming in their replies than the Civil Service tradition would generally allow. With all the interviewees, these types of questions, on occasion, would have to be abandoned fairly quickly if there was a sense that the interviewee felt that he or she was not being sufficiently ‘challenged’.²⁹ Equally, they would have to be returned to with equal speed if the course of questioning was becoming too contentious. The questions for the initial interviews were based on available secondary sources, but increasingly the data gathered from the interviews themselves were used as a basis for subsequent interviews. Responses were recorded through the use of notes and shorthand and were transcribed the same day. Although not, perhaps, as ‘efficient’ as the use of electronic equipment, this method did have the advantage of providing the interviewer with a slight ‘breathing space’ between questions to consider both the interviewee’s response and the interviewer’s next line of questioning. It also had the significant advantage, where time and courtesy allowed, of reviewing the responses near the end of the interview and seeking further clarification or returning to points already made.

While there was no deliberate effort or design on the part of the interviewer to encourage the interviewees to be indiscreet, in some respects the more ‘successful’ the interview, in the sense of having been offered a particularly revealing or indiscreet piece of data, the greater the ethical dilemma or the tendency towards self-censorship.³⁰ While all the interviewees were aware of the

²⁷ Webbs quoted in Burgess, R. ‘The Unstructured Interview as a Conversation’, in Burgess, R. (ed.) (1982) *Field research: A Sourcebook and Field Manual*. London: Allen & Unwin, p. 107.

²⁸ McHugh, J. D. ‘The Lords’ will be done: interviewing the powerful in education’, in Walford (ed.) *Researching the Powerful in Education*, p. 63.

²⁹ Commenting on the interviews they undertook, Heclo and Wildavsky noted how ‘The moment the interviewer shows unfamiliarity with the subject (though why else would he be there), he will begin to feel himself on the smooth slipway to the outer office’. Heclo and Wildavsky, *Private Government of Public Money*, p. lxxvii.

³⁰ McPherson and Raab noted that when they felt interviews had been granted, often in busy schedules and where the researcher was treated, sometimes in people’s homes, with courtesy and

nature and context of the research, even with this ‘informed consent’, there remains with the researcher a ‘duty of confidentiality’. As described by the Oral History Society, this ‘can arise without the supplier of information explicitly stating that it be treated as confidential’.³¹ Given the central emphasis on the impact of, and often the clashes between, personalities, there were numerous judgements as to when replies were overtly personal and not entirely relevant, or whether, despite elements of vindictiveness, they also helped to illustrate some of the tensions and confusions surrounding questions of policy. The overtly libellous responses have been omitted, while other quotes have been paraphrased or not directly attributed to an individual, without, hopefully, losing the essence of the data. Even so, there are also voices, some officials and politicians that are not directly heard. Where their contributions or actions are discussed within the text, wherever possible, the author has attempted to balance criticisms with any positive or supportive comments that were offered by other interviewees.

Like Fitz and Halpin, it is also possible to contend that, in some cases, the factual information garnered through the interview process can occasionally be of less importance than the knowledge gained about the social and political context of policy making at an elite level.³² Sharing these contexts and conflicts through the use of first-hand accounts also helps make the history of the period become more ‘democratic’. This is not in the generally-accepted sense associated with oral history of ‘bringing recognition to substantial groups of people who had been ignored’,³³ or ‘to recover neglected or silenced accounts of past experience’.³⁴ Rather, for the general, as well as the academic reader, the reporting of the course in education policy, no more than in other policy areas, is littered with phrases such as ‘Sources close to’ and ‘According to senior officials’. Putting names and faces to some of these individuals also helps to reframe some of the assumed relationships and contributions to policy, and helps

hospitality, they felt an almost instinctive need for reciprocal good manners. In their case, ‘this has influenced all our decisions in the presentation of evidence’. McPherson and Raab, *Governing Education*, p. 62.

³¹ Ward, A. (2003) ‘Is your oral history legal and ethical?’ Available at: www.ohs.org.uk/ethics/, p. 8.

³² Fitz, J. and Halpin, D. ‘Ministers and Mandarins: educational research in elite settings’, in Walford (ed.), *Researching the Powerful in Education*, p. 49.

³³ Thompson, *Voice of the Past*, p. 7.

³⁴ Perks, R. and Thomson, A. ‘Advocacy and empowerment: introduction’, in Perks, R. and Thomson, A. (1998) *The Oral History Reader*. London: Routledge, p. 183.

to provide a more open account of what may have transpired. In so doing, this study also draws on oral sources not conventionally heard, such as senior officials, many of whom appeared comfortable to talk about events which had lost a degree of their confidentiality with the passing of time and administrations.³⁵ A particularly rich seam of insight and information that had also been untapped in previous studies was that of ministerial special advisers and junior ministers, many of whom were close enough to events to illuminate what may have happened, yet were sufficiently detached to retain some degree of objectivity.³⁶

‘Words’, argued Paul Thompson, ‘breathe life into history’.³⁷ Yet sometimes transcripts of interviews can fail to convey messages that can be picked up through body language, or through a change in tone, or a sudden *froideur* when a particular topic or individual is discussed. Throughout this study, the author has allowed the words of the interviewees speak for themselves as in the style of a script, so that, as far as possible, readers can almost hear the range of dissonant voices and personalities involved from among the *regulars*, the *irregulars* and the *politicos*. The information and opinions gleaned from this rough form of first hand ‘triangulation’ has, in turn, been used in tandem with whatever information was already available in the public domain. In reviewing this literature, the author has broadly attempted to match the sources with the typology already identified.

Published sources

One of the more remarkable aspects of education reform during the Conservative administrations was that, on occasion, it appeared that influence and power over policy choices had been sub-contracted out to a phenomenon almost totally

³⁵ Franklin also drew attention to the degree to which the application of Official Secrets Act and the ‘Radcliffe Principles’ have waned somewhat in recent years with the increasing use of interviews and first hand accounts in ministerial memoirs and academic studies, but also the very public inquiries into episodes such as the ‘Arms for Iraq’ affair, BSE, and more recently and spectacularly, Lord Hutton’s Inquiry into the death of the government scientist, Dr David Kelly. Franklin, K. (2001) ‘The MSC, the DES and the Origins of the TVEI’. University of Sheffield: Ph.D. thesis, pp. 30-31.

³⁶ Stuart Sexton, who has been extensively interviewed and quoted elsewhere, is the exception to this pattern.

³⁷ Thompson, *Voice of the Past*, p. 15.

unknown until then, what I have termed the *irregulars*. This high-profile combination of advisers, think tanks and pressure groups was a particular feature of Conservative politics since the 1970s and has generated its own sub-genre of literature on both sides of the Atlantic. In the case of think tanks, their nature and purpose in general, but of those in Britain in particular, must be treated with caution. Largely derived from the American experience, where the 'sheer number and diversity of private research groups hampers accurate definition', three broad categories have been identified – 'universities without students', 'contract research organisations', and 'advocacy tanks'. It is the third category, 'advocacy tanks', described as groups having 'a strong policy partisanship (often derived from an equally determined ideological position) and who campaign aggressively on current policy issues', which are of most interest to and most closely resemble the British experience.³⁸

The role played by the think tanks during the Conservative governments was also related to how the nature of advice, other than that provided by permanent officials had developed. Following the demise of the Central Policy Review Staff in 1983, advice to the centre of government increasingly depended on a strengthened Number Ten Policy Unit and a wide range of ad hoc unofficial advisers and bodies outside of government. This trend was further exacerbated within the Conservative governments by the lack of status of any internal advisory bodies, such as the Conservative Research Department, which had largely been bypassed by Mrs Thatcher and her acolytes since the establishment of the Centre for Policy Studies (CPS). According to John Barnes and Richard Cockett, 'The think tanks really form part of the outer ring (of decision makers)

³⁸ Descriptions taken from Denham, A. and Garnett, M. (1996) 'The Nature and Impact of Think Tanks in Contemporary Britain', in Gamble, A. et al. (1996) *Ideas and Think Tanks in Contemporary Britain*, London: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd., pp. 44-45. For some, the 'strong policy partisanship' of advocacy tanks disqualifies them from the status of 'real' think tanks. This 'pure' version of what think tanks should or might be, contrasts with that of Hayek who described think tanks as 'second hand dealers in ideas'. Desai suggests that they were second hand in the sense that they 'were typically not intellectual originators but served to collect, distil and preserve certain strands of ideas and to diffuse them more widely'. Desai, Radhika. (1994) 'Second Hand Dealers in Ideas: Think Tanks and the Thatcherite hegemony'. *New Left Review*, 203, Jan/Feb, pp. 31- 32.

and have filled a void which was not being filled by the existing party machinery'.³⁹

While the access that all of these *irregulars* enjoyed at the highest levels of government during the Conservative administrations of the 1980s and 1990s is unquestioned, what must be considered is whether access is equivalent to influence. Certainly not, as far as the politicians are concerned. Oscar Wilde's biographer noted how many of Wilde's contemporaries shunned him when he was alive, but 'entertained him gladly in their memoirs'.⁴⁰ The *irregulars*, in general, have suffered the same fate in reverse at the hands of their political masters. Few accounts acknowledge their existence, let alone their influence. Yet absence of evidence from this quarter cannot be taken as evidence of absence or indeed influence. Their assumed influence certainly figures prominently in much of the secondary literature on education reform during the 1980s and 1990s. 'In the overall shaping of policy', wrote Whitty and Menter in 1988, 'what has emerged more and more clearly over recent months is the effectiveness of small but well organized right-wing pressure groups'.⁴¹ In 1992, the newly-departed HMCI, Eric Bolton, was moved to 'savagely the government's education policies and accused ministers of being overly influenced by political right-wingers'.⁴² The government, Bolton said, did not listen to its specialist advisers but 'It does listen to John Marks and the Adam Smith Institute. . . It does listen to the Centre for Policy Studies and a small group of independent school heads. . .'.⁴³

On the face of it, one could almost choose at random from the many of the publications put out by the most well-known think tanks and pressure groups on education policy and observe what appears to be a clear and obvious link to subsequent actions and statements by ministers.⁴⁴ Yet to accept a casual

³⁹ Barnes, J. and Cockett, R. 'The Making of Party Policy', in Seldon, A. and Ball, S. (1994) *Conservative Century: The Conservative Party since 1900*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 380.

⁴⁰ Ellmann, R. (1987), *Oscar Wilde*. London: Penguin, p. xiii.

⁴¹ Whitty, G and Menter, I. (1988) 'Lessons of Thatcherism: Education Policy in England and Wales 1978-1988'. *Journal of Law and Society*, Vol. 16, No. 1, 1988, p. 58.

⁴² *Times Educational Supplement* (hereafter *TES*), 24 July 1992.

⁴³ Bolton, E. 'Imaginary Gardens and Real Toads'. Address to annual conference of LEAs, 20 July 1992, reprinted in Chitty, C. and Simon, B. (eds.) (1993) *Education Answers Back: Critical Responses to Government Policy*. London: Lawrence and Wishart, p. 15.

⁴⁴ See e.g. Adam Smith Institute (1984) *Omega Report: Education Policy*. London: Adam Smith Institute; O Keeffe, D. (ed.) (1986), *The Wayward Curriculum*. Exeter: Social Affairs Unit; Sexton, S. (1987), *Our Schools: A Radical Policy*. Warlingham: Institute of Economic Affairs;

correlation between position papers put forth by various think tanks and individuals on subsequent public policy would be rash. As one study of think tanks, by Diana Stone, has remarked,

Establishing the progenitors of policy ideas is not easy to discern. The forces that converge to influence policymaking often shroud any casual nexus that may exist between think tanks and policy.⁴⁵

Their overall contribution, then, to the British experience remains ambiguous. Despite the breathless, if largely uncritical accounts, such as that of Richard Cockett,⁴⁶ other studies such as that by Simon James have concluded that ‘The impact of think tanks on Britain’s policy-making system has been marginal rather than structural’.⁴⁷ Within the literature on the *irregulars*, little middle ground appears between the inflated claims by and for some of the groups, and the scepticism and dismissiveness of politicians and academics. The difficulty in using published sources to try and judge the extent of this influence is that even an ambiguous description such as ‘casual nexus’, no more than that of ‘loose nexus’, ascribes almost a formality to arrangements, that, in many cases, simply did not exist, whether with think tanks or individual advisers in general. On one celebrated occasion it was reported how Kenneth Clarke had ‘taken advice’ from Lord Griffiths, his newly-appointed chairman of SEAC, on possible limits for coursework marks for GCSE examinations. The meeting in question was, in the words of Lord Griffiths, an ‘informal dinner’. The *TES* was mightily unimpressed that ‘somewhere between the soup and the cheese SEAC seems to

Burchill, J. (1991), *Inspecting Schools: Breaking the Monopoly*. London: Centre for Policy Studies.

⁴⁵ Stone, D. (1996) *Capturing the Political Imagination: Think Tanks and the Policy Process*. London: Frank Cass and Co. Ltd., p. 110.

⁴⁶ Cockett, R. (1993) *Thinking the Unthinkable: Think Tanks and the Economic Counter-Revolution 1931-1983*. London: HarperCollins.

⁴⁷ James, S. ‘The Idea Brokers: The Impact of Think Tanks on British Government’. *Public Administration*, Vol. 71, Winter 1993, p. 504. The verdict of another study of both British and American think tanks was that, ‘There is virtually no example of any legislation on either side of the Atlantic that was entirely and uniquely due to one individual think tank’. Hames, T. and Feasey, R., ‘Anglo-American Think Tanks under Reagan and Thatcher’, in Adonis, A. and Hames, T. (eds.) (1994) *A Conservative Revolution? The Thatcher-Reagan Decade in Perspective*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, p. 231.

have arrived at limits on coursework of 20 to 30 per cent for the core subjects'.⁴⁸

Although firmly in the *irregular* camp, as chairman of SEAC, Lord Griffiths was one of those individuals whose role briefly overlapped with those identified as being the *regulars*. Something rarely acknowledged was that, since the 1970s, there had been and continued to be a deal of common ground between elements among the *irregulars* and the *regulars*, particularly senior officials within the DES. While the common ground may have been more on the diagnosis of a general malaise within the school system rather than on the remedies, the *irregulars* did appear in some respects to have an unlikely ally. Although there was clearly going to be conflict with the neo-liberal or free-market approach, according to one account by Salter and Tapper, at many other points during the 1980s there would be 'a happy marriage of the Conservative Party's educational ideology and the Department's centralising instincts'.⁴⁹ 'Centralising instincts' was certainly a description that would have been difficult to apply to the DES with much conviction prior to 1976. Cushioned by favourable economic circumstances and a relatively non-controversial policy area, the Department and its deficiencies had been able to remain distant from the spotlight and unperturbed. The *Yellow Book* and Callaghan's Ruskin speech marked a crossroads from that position. The era of growth since 1944 had ended and, with it, 'non-control' of the curriculum was also coming to an end. The subsequent attempts by the DES towards increased central direction of the curriculum during the period between 1976 and the 'watershed' of 1986-87 is well documented by writers such as Lawton, Chitty and Salter and Tapper.⁵⁰ In their 1981 study, Salter and Tapper argued that a 'bureaucratic dynamic' was

⁴⁸ *TES*, 4 November 1991. George Walden also recounted another occasion when matters educational were decided over dinner. During what was also described as an 'informal dinner', this time between Sir Edward Boyle and Lady Plowden, the latter is reported to have told Sir Edward that 'she wished something could be done about "our primary schools"', and found herself immediately appointed as chairwoman of the subsequent inquiry. Walden described this episode as providing 'a remarkable insight into the casual, clubby way the educational destiny of the children of others can be decided'. Walden, G. (1996) *We Should Know Better. Solving the Education Crisis*. London: Fourth Estate Limited, pp. 134-5.

⁴⁹ Salter, B. and Tapper, T. (1981) *Education, Politics and the State*. London: Grant Macintyre, p. 229.

⁵⁰ See e.g. Salter and Tapper, *Education, Politics and the State*; Salter, B. and Tapper, T. (1985) *Power and Policy in Education*. Lewes: The Falmer Press; Lawton, *The Tightening Grip*; Chitty, *Towards a New Education System*.

driving the DES to gain exclusive control over education policy making. Despite newer interventions from outside agencies, such as the Manpower Services Commission, they argued in a further study, in 1985, that the Department was continuing in its efforts 'to create a web of Departmental controls'. Although Ball and Chitty argued that the changing role of the DES was occurring, or was largely a readjustment of roles within the context of the traditional 'partnership' relationship, writing in 1995, Fletcher suggested that the extent of and the reaction to increasing DES intervention might be leading to 'a new educational partnership being forged'.⁵¹

While Ball has challenged the absence of any ideological perspective to Salter and Tapper's arguments,⁵² other accounts of the 1986-87 period have tended to overemphasise political and ideological motivations. This is often to the detriment of the continued degree of influence that certain officials within the DES and individuals such as Kenneth Baker were able to exercise on the course of education reform. A corrective to this view was provided in accounts by Duncan Graham, the first Chairman and Chief Executive of the National Curriculum Council (NCC), and Tony Taylor.⁵³ The latter argued that Baker, strongly aided and abetted by his senior officials, was able to thwart the more minimalist ambitions of Mrs Thatcher and her advisers over curriculum reform. Duncan Graham's account, written with the journalist David Tytler, illustrates the absolute determination of senior officials to then maintain control over 'their' subject-based National Curriculum. Although Graham was critical of the domineering role of officials when dealing with the NCC, other accounts, particularly by some of the *irregulars*, are more overtly scathing about their role and motivations. The title of one account, *The Empire Strikes Back*, subtitled, *The 'Creative Subversion' of the National Curriculum*, deliciously captures the

⁵¹ Fletcher, J. (1995) 'Policy Making in DES/DfE via Consensus and Contention'. *Oxford Review of Education*, Vol. 21, No. 2, p. 146.

⁵² Ball, *Politics and Policy Making in Education*.

⁵³ Graham, D. with Tytler, D. (1993) *A Lesson For Us All; The Making of the National Curriculum*. London: Routledge. Also useful, partly as series of 'outtakes' from *A Lesson*, is Graham, D. (1996) *The Education Racket. Who Cares about the Children?* Glasgow: Neil Wilson Publishing. Taylor, T. 'Movers and shakers: high politics and the origins of the National Curriculum'. *The Curriculum Journal*, Vol. 6, No. 2, summer 1995.

suspensions and the fears of the reformers that their efforts were being undone by perfidious officials.⁵⁴

If, through these accounts, it appeared sometimes that the *regulars* were in control, sometimes the *irregulars*, at other times, it appeared that no-one was in control. This certainly appeared to apply to those who were theoretically in charge, the *politicos*. With regard to the 1988 Education Act, Davies-Griffiths has argued that there was ‘a fundamental change in the process (of educational policy making)’ with ‘politicisation’ the dominant feature and one that was likely to continue.⁵⁵ While ministers are included in this process of politicisation, there is little sense of the likely effects of this politicisation, or the relative distribution of power and influence between them and the other interests involved in this process, and the difficulties they faced or would face. In many respects, successive ministers were hoist by their colleagues’ petards. Since the 1970s, Conservative politicians had been neither slow nor scrupulous in tapping into a reservoir of public antipathy or prejudices regarding aspects of the school system for their own ends. But if it was unsurprising that political opportunism with the occasional accompaniment of political principle should have provided the critical mass necessary to embark on radical education reform, once ‘the legislative whirlwind of 1988 to 1993’ was unleashed,⁵⁶ it should not have been surprising that politicians found themselves struggling to contain and control its consequences. Geoffrey Fry has written that ‘British political parties are only properly organised to compete for office. They are organised for slogan making, but not for policy preparation’.⁵⁷ So it was to prove as regards education policy following the elections of 1979, 1983, 1987 and 1992. Since the 1970s, this was due as much to a party political failure as to personal shortcomings. Aside from a tiny minority, interest within the Conservative Party towards education, never mind state education, was minimal. The account by Christopher Knight, *The Making of Tory Education Policy in Post-war Britain 1950-1986*, trains not so

⁵⁴ Marshland, D. and Seaton, N. (1994) *The Empire Strikes Back: the ‘Creative Subversion’ of the National Curriculum*. York: Campaign for Real Education.

⁵⁵ Davies-Griffiths, ‘Developments in the making of policy in education in the twentieth century’, p. 236.

⁵⁶ Barber, M. (1994) *The Making of the 1944 Education Act*. London: Cassell, p. ix.

⁵⁷ Fry, G. (1981) *The Administrative ‘Revolution’ in Whitehall: A Study of the Politics of Administrative Change in British Central Government since the 1950s*. London: Croom Helm, p. 180.

much a spotlight as a microscope upon the inner workings of the Tory party in attempting to get to grips with its stance on education. With such a tight focus, the degree of permeation or interest within the Party towards its new formulation can be distorted. Knight's book uncritically charts the exertions of a tiny minority of activists, themselves part of a minority within the Party, who had an interest in education and were successful in providing a platform on which to construct an education policy. Yet even this small minority was itself further fragmented. While Knight himself uses the umbrella term 'Conservative Educationists', the members of this group broadly concur with Dale's typology of Conservative educationists consisting of Industrial Trainers, Old Tories, Populists, Moral Entrepreneurs and Privatizers.⁵⁸

With many of the political participants in this study still active in politics and elsewhere, there are few first-hand accounts available. The notable exception can be found in Kenneth Baker's *The Turbulent Years*.⁵⁹ Written in a similar style to his spoken pronouncements, Baker glides effortlessly through his time at the DES, always with an eye to the main chance, always at the centre and always apparently in control of events. This is very much contradicted in Mrs Thatcher's own account, where Brian Griffiths plays a leading role,⁶⁰ while Baker's role and influence was also very much denigrated by his Cabinet colleague, Nigel Lawson.⁶¹ Unlike Baker's memoirs, Gillian Shephard's are much less forthcoming, but in many respects are much more unintentionally informative through their omissions. In *Shephard's Watch*, Shephard attempted something a bit grander than memoirs and sought 'to explore the nature of power in politics'.⁶² For someone who was keen to write about the exercise of power in politics when out of office, she was notoriously reluctant to use it when in office. As a work of political analysis the book is, in the rather unkind description in

⁵⁸ Knight, *Tory Education Policy*, p. 150. Dale, R. 'Thatcherism in education', in Ahier, J. and Flude, M. (1983) *Contemporary Education Policy*. Beckenham: Croom Helm, p. 237 and passim.

⁵⁹ Baker, K. (1993) *The Turbulent Years*. London: Faber and Faber.

⁶⁰ Writing of this 'crucial area' of the manifesto proposals for the 1987 election, Mrs Thatcher wrote that she 'was clear what these should be. . . largely as a result of the work done by Brian Griffiths'. Thatcher, M. (1993) *The Downing Street Years*. London: HarperCollins, p. 570.

⁶¹ Lawson, N. (1992) *The View from No. 11*. London: Bantam Press, p. 606.

⁶² Shephard, G. (2000) *Shephard's Watch. Illusions of Power in British Politics*. London: Politicos Publishing, p. 7.

Roth's *Parliamentary Profiles* of the author herself, 'a bit of a soufflé'.⁶³ Given that her time at Education was the pinnacle of her ministerial career, in charge of arguably the fourth great office of State, her comments about this time are few, rancorous, and much more disingenuous than those of Baker. According to Shephard, John Patten's, and presumably her own, misfortunes were the fault of permanent officials, 'a failure by Whitehall to recognise that it had not equipped itself to deal with the change of culture and activity implicit in the Government's education reforms'.⁶⁴ John Major's account of his attempts at education reform is equally exculpatory with he and his Secretaries of State beset by the 'complacent ideologues of the education establishment', 'devotees of progressive education' and 'strong official resistance'.⁶⁵ In her memoirs, Mrs Thatcher retained her distaste for Civil Servants in general and the DES in particular, while also displaying her credentials as the frustrated radical in berating her own ministerial appointees.⁶⁶

The personalities and traits of the individual Secretaries of State between 1979 and 1997 are also well to the fore in *Radical Educational Policies and Conservative Secretaries of State*, a series of interviews conducted by Peter Ribbins and Brian Sheratt.⁶⁷ Although very much non-confrontational, the interviews do reveal insights into the mindset of the various individuals. In the context of this study, what emerged unspoken from the interviews was the sheer diversity and divergence of approaches to education reform taken by Baker and his colleagues, with very little sense of continuity or understanding between changes of personnel. Although the interviews themselves are a valuable source of information, what was not attempted, or what was left for others to do, was to correlate the responses with what was known from other sources to provide a more useful context for examining the course of education policy under the various ministers.

⁶³ Roth, A. and Griddle, B. (2000) *Parliamentary Profiles, S-Z, 1997-02*. London: Parliamentary Profiles Services Ltd., p. 1939.

⁶⁴ Shephard, *Shephard's Watch*, p. 109.

⁶⁵ Major, J. (1999) *John Major. The Autobiography*. London: HarperCollins, p. 255, p. 394, p. 255.

⁶⁶ See e.g. Thatcher, M. (1993) *The Downing Street Years*. London: HarperCollins, p. 151, p. 589, and Baker, *Turbulent Years*, p.161.

⁶⁷ Ribbins, P. and Sherratt, B. (1997) *Radical Educational Policies and Conservative Secretaries of State*. London: Cassell.

While individuals drawn from across the typology of *regulars*, *irregulars* and *politicos* figure in various degrees in most of the secondary accounts of education policy, they are very much written about and analysed at arms length. They are seen to act or react within the confines of respective political and ideological roles, in very much deterministic fashion, with an almost curious detachment from each other. In his detailed and informative study, *Power and Politics at the Department of Education and Science*, Ian Lawrence examines the post-war evolution of the DES.⁶⁸ In many respects Lawrence's account sits comfortably within the 'traditional' Whitehall analysis genre. His conclusions, in terms of many of the more general problems and dilemmas that the Civil Service faced and is facing, are pertinent not just to the Education department. Although Lawrence comments upon the personnel involved, little more than biographical details are provided, while their remarks are analysed in almost strict policy and operational terms. There is little sense of any internal political or personal dynamic or conflict between those involved, and the role of senior officials and advisers in education reform is certainly examined less than that of other actors. Accounts by Conservative politicians take an almost wholly negative or critical view of the role played by officials,⁶⁹ while academic studies on various policy initiatives such as Grant Maintained schools and the City Technology Colleges tend to tread lightly on the sensibilities and possible motivations of officials. Only in Duncan Graham's and Marshland and Seaton's accounts do we get much of a sense of highly pro-active officials intervening strongly to shape policy.⁷⁰ In their turn, the series of interviews by Sheratt and Ribbins are tightly focussed on the personalities and motivations of the Secretaries of State, with little or no reference to the role or contribution of other participants such as junior ministers or officials.

Taking the literature on the *irregulars*, *regulars* and *politicos* as a whole, what generally emerges are a series of parallel sources. Accounts tend to focus primarily on one of the groups with others having walk-on parts. Where the

⁶⁸ Lawrence, I. (1992) *Power and Politics at the Department of Education and Science*, London: Cassell.

⁶⁹ See for example Baker, *Turbulent Years*, Shephard, *Shephard's Watch*, Boyson, R. (1995) *Speaking My Mind*. London: Peter Owen.

⁷⁰ The critical account of the role of Civil Servants in Melanie Phillips' highly publicised *All Must Have Prizes* draws heavily on Marshland and Seaton's work.

combined impact or roles of *regulars*, *irregulars* and *politicos* are discussed, the accounts tend to focus on individual episodes or single-strand accounts. They are introduced to provide a context or introduction to the main focus of the studies, which is often on the impact of the policy itself. Arguably, this almost unconscious separation of the roles of these newly-identified groups involved in the policy process reflected the fact that, however imperfect the previous policy community had been, there had been some sense of joint obligation or endeavour or ‘shared framework’ between the participants. This was rarely the case between the *irregulars*, *regulars* and *politicos*. So much so that it would be difficult to describe them as constituting a policy community. Temporary alliances might form over particular aspects of policy, but as Lawton described the system associated with his typology mentioned earlier, it remained at its most civil, a ‘tension system’. Arguably, more often than not, it resembled a ‘conflict system’. Groups and individuals were often highly antagonistic toward each other, and there was little by the way of shared interest or values.⁷¹

This thesis provides a longitudinal ‘joined-up’ account where the combined impact of these groups and individuals is analysed, and where the conflicts between them are often seen as determining the course of policies themselves. In essence, people matter. In the case of Conservative education policies between 1976 and 1997, it was not that politics and personalities were all that mattered. Rather, the problem was that they mattered too much.

Organisation

While certain themes, or aspects of policy, run through this study, the data has been organised and presented within a narrative rather than a thematic structure, with the period between 1979 and 1997 divided into chronological packages, punctuated by the arrival and exit of successive Secretaries of State. This approach has an underlying validity, other than convenience, in that it was the Secretary of State who was in the cockpit of the Department, who prioritised the policies and set the tenor for much of the public debate during their period of

⁷¹ While accepting that there would be some degree of overlap and common perspectives between members of the groups on certain issues, Lawton was suggesting that ‘the central

office. Yet even such an apparently straightforward structure has its own potential for distortion, especially when contextualising and presenting the data. ‘Often the decisions taken have a material effect on the interpretation itself’, wrote one historian, ‘What might appear to be a conventional historical narrative is often nothing of the kind, but the outcome of a series of aesthetic and interpretative choices’.⁷²

While such choices were no less present in this study, the narrative structure also allows the thesis to explore and integrate the effect of what Becker refers to as *contingency*. In the search for causation or explanation, Becker presents a narrative model whereby it is a process in which there is contingency, in the sense that at various points casual factors can intervene at different points in time, with the result that outcomes are not determinate or predictable, at least not in any strong way.⁷³ Thus, there are a variety of routes that events might follow from any starting position depending not just on the particular factors that operate, but also on the sequencing and timing of their operation. In applying Becker’s model within a narrative structure, we can also see how ‘casual’ personal and political factors impacted upon the course of policy in similarly unpredictable fashion.⁷⁴

The remainder of this thesis is organised as follows. The following chapter examines the years immediately prior to 1979 and explores the political and policy contexts from which emerged the groups of *regulars*, *irregulars* and *politicos*. In chapter two, the immediate impact of the newly elected Conservative administration on the field of education policy under Mark Carlisle is examined. While the arrival of Keith Joseph in 1981 marked a turning point in the course of education policy, chapter three suggests that this was as much despite, as because of, Joseph’s actions when in office. Chapters four and five

authority should be treated as a “tension system”, not as a consensus’. Lawton, *The Tightening Grip*, p. 17.

⁷² Evans, *In Defence of History*, p. 143.

⁷³ In the Introduction to the first volume of his biography of W.B. Yeats, Roy Foster argued that, while some previous studies had adopted a thematic approach to the life of the poet, he did not feel it was suitable for his study as ‘we do not, alas, live our lives in themes, but day by day’. Foster, R. F. (1997) *W.B. Yeats: A Life. 1: The Apprentice Mage, 1865-1914*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. xxvii.

⁷⁴ Becker in Hammersley, M. (2001) *Educational Research. Policy Making and Practice*. London: Paul Chapman Publishing, pp. 89-90, and Becker, H. (1998) *Tricks of the Trade. How To Think About Your Research While Doing It*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. 26.

examine the legacy of Kenneth Baker. The former chapter offers an account of the political background to his formulation of the 1988 Education Reform Act; the latter chapter then examines specifically how the proposals for a national curriculum and Grant Maintained schools were developed under Baker.

For Baker's successors, the 1988 Act would prove an indigestible *pot-pourri* of conflicting and competing aims. None more so than for Baker's immediate successor, John MacGregor. Chapter six examines the reasons why MacGregor was moved out of education after only 16 months in office. The almost simultaneous arrival of Kenneth Clarke at Education and John Major in Downing Street, as detailed in chapter seven, provided an additional ratchet to the turmoil in an already pressurised area of policy, and whose ultimate conclusion during John Patten's time is examined in chapter eight. Chapter nine charts the efforts of Major and his new Secretary of State, Gillian Shephard, to retrieve the initiative in education policy in the run up to the 1997 election. In the final chapter, conclusions are drawn.

CHAPTER 2

1976-1979: *No longer 'positive, helpful, worthy and dull'*

Introduction

Prior to 1979 criticisms of the schools system had begun to coalesce around the issue of comprehensivisation and its perceived consequences. Many of these concerns were first brought to wider public attention through the intervention of James Callaghan and his Ruskin College speech of 1976. In examining the cause and effects of Callaghan's intervention, we can establish the political and policy inheritance for the different strands of opinion and personalities on the advent of the first Thatcher administration of 1979. From where did the *irregulars* emerge? Were there tensions already in evidence between the different strands of opinions that comprised this grouping? How much was the partnership metaphor already under strain prior to 1979? What were the strains within the existing policy community? What was the political response to these developments?

The Road to Ruskin – The *Irregulars*

Stuart Sexton has suggested that the pivotal event in the emergence of a new agenda 'not just in education, was the turning away from Heath-minded conservatism, to the re-emphasis on individual freedom and the market'.¹ This 'neo-liberalism', or 'economic liberalism', formed one strand or faction within the *irregulars* as it did in the phenomenon that was termed the 'New Right'. While some studies would question just how 'new' the New Right was,² it was the Conservative Party that became the central focus for the subsequent package of New Right philosophies. Within the Party, Sir Keith Joseph would prove the most influential individual in bringing these arguments to the heart of the British

¹ Quoted Ball, *Politics and Policy Making*, p. 23.

² See for example, Greenleaf, W. (1983) *The British Political Tradition*. London: Methuen. According to Geoffrey Hodgson, all that occurred during the 1970s was 'bringing out into the open a Tory tradition that has been there all along if you knew in which sheltered pools to look

political system. In his writings and speeches from the mid-1970s onwards, Keith Joseph both tapped into and contributed to a broader trend, whereby the intellectual high ground, what he termed ‘the battle for ideas’, once the unchallenged domain of the left, was subject to challenge from a renewed and increasingly self-confident right. ‘There are signs’, wrote the Conservative historian, Lord Blake, in 1976, ‘of one of those rare and profound changes in the intellectual climate which occur only once or twice in a hundred years. . . There is a wind of change blowing through Britain and much of the democratic world – and it comes from the right, not the left’.³

Allowing for a degree of hyperbole, there was a noticeable shift in ‘the intellectual climate’, even if the overall numbers involved remained surprisingly small. In the preface to the second edition of *Mill and Liberalism*, Maurice Cowling suggested that of the five overlapping movements or ‘faces’ he identified as constituting the New Right, the process was ‘conducted by about fifty people’.⁴ For the Conservatives these also entailed ‘a harvest of intellectual refugees from the left. . . and the many school and university teachers who were being driven rightwards by disillusion with progressive methods and left wing intolerance’.⁵ Of particular importance, in terms of education policy, would be Caroline Cox, John Marks and Rhodes Boyson, each of whom made the journey rightwards. By then, the centre of gravity of the education debate was certainly beginning to move away from the left of centre position. Essential to the force and eventual degree of acceptance of such a shift, initially in the economic sphere but eventually filtering through to other areas such as education, was how the arguments and influence of the new ‘intellectual climate’ were disseminated through a range of think tanks, pressure groups and individuals.

James Cornford has described think tanks as ‘the performing fleas of the body politic, constantly seeking that critical moment when a small sting may

for it’. Hodgson, G. (1984) ‘Now is the time for all Right-thinking men...’, *The Sunday Times Magazine*, 4 March 1984, p. 52.

³ Bradley, I. ‘A wind of change blows from the academic right’. *Times Higher Education Supplement (THES)* 29 October 1976. Lord Blake was commenting on the series of essays written by young Oxford dons – including John Patten - and published as *The Conservative Opportunity*.

⁴ Cowling, M. (1990) *Mill and Liberalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. xxxvi.

⁵ Harrison, B. ‘Mrs. Thatcher and the Intellectuals’. *Twentieth Century British History*, Vol. 5, No. 2, 1994, p. 219.

goad the beast in the right direction'.⁶ This description would prove particularly apt as regards education policy with two institutions in particular – the Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA) and the Centre for Policy Studies (CPS). These were to be far and away the most prominent in 'goading the beasts' that were the Thatcher and Major governments toward their preferred solutions, once the opportunities presented themselves. Founded in 1955, the IEA was run by Arthur Seldon and Ralph Harris. Through his links with Harris, an important bridge between the IEA and the education reformers would be Rhodes Boyson, who has described the IEA as 'the lighthouse for the legitimate right'.⁷ Arguments for the increased use of market forces in education were contained in IEA pamphlets such as *Education for Democrats* in 1963 and *Experiment in Choice in Education* in 1975. These, in turn, would be echoed in the *Black Papers*, of which Boyson was latterly co-editor, and his own *Battle Lines for Education* in 1973 and *Parental Choice* in 1975.⁸ The IEA would also house the National Council for Educational Standards (NCES), the Social Affairs Unit (SAU), and an Education Unit under Stuart Sexton. It would also assist in setting up the No Turning Back Group of Conservative MPs during the 1980s.

The Centre for Policy Studies was founded by Keith Joseph and Margaret Thatcher. While the IEA was detached from the Conservative Party, the CPS was never more than semi-detached and was always going to be 'a very different creature, part agent and part actor'.⁹ According to one account of think tanks, the CPS would end up as 'a sort of clearing house for the deposits and borrowings of ideas'.¹⁰ How it was used by Mrs Thatcher and some of her ministers as a 'clearing house', was primarily through the use of study groups, with the Education Study Group under Caroline Cox and John Marks, having the most significant impact on the education debate.

⁶ Cornford, J. (1990) 'Performing Fleas: Reflections from a Think Tank', *Policy Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 4, p. 22.

⁷ Boyson used the phrase during a seminar at the IEA, 'New Thoughts on the Educational Voucher', 17 February 1998.

⁸ Griggs, C. 'The New Right and English Secondary Education', in Lowe, R. (1989) *The Changing Secondary School*, Lewes: Falmer Press, p. 107.

⁹ Barnes, J. and Cockett, R. 'The Making of Party Policy', in Seldon, A. and Ball, S. (1994) *Conservative Century: The Conservative Party since 1900*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 381.

¹⁰ Desai, Radhika. (1994) 'Second Hand Dealers in Ideas: Think Tanks and the Thatcherite hegemony'. *New Left Review*, 203, Jan/Feb, p. 51.

While both the IEA and the CPS were proponents of the economic or neo-liberal arguments, they represented only one strand in the emergence of a new political and intellectual agenda. The low-church fervour of the ‘economic evangelicals’ in attacking post war economic settlement, would be more than matched by the high church contumely of the ‘neo-conservatives’ or ‘cultural restorationists’ in attacking what was perceived as a parallel moral decline.¹¹ Typical among these groups would be the Conservative Philosophy Group (CPG), formed in 1975 by John Casey and Roger Scruton, colleagues of Maurice Cowling at Peterhouse College, Cambridge. Less overtly activist than their neo-liberal counterparts, the neo-conservatives managed the neat trick of striking a populist chord while despising everything populist. According to Scruton, the Group was to be ‘anti-permissive’. It was established at a time when the Conservative Party appeared to be ‘floundering around’ and was concerned to revive and renew Christian morality in Conservative Party thinking.¹² Their house journal was the *Salisbury Review*, in which Scruton was to write how ‘The importance of regaining the commanding heights of the moral and intellectual economy has got to be clearly perceived by the partisans of conservatism’.¹³ While this dichotomy in New Right thought between the moralists and the free-marketeers would have a prominent and ultimately damaging role in the later education reforms of the 1980s, both standpoints achieved almost disproportionate prominence during the 1970s, partly through the success of the series of Black Papers. The first Black Paper was published in 1969 and much of their subsequent content was set up in antithesis to what the writers saw as the consequences of the ‘comprehensive experiment’ and the misguided search for equality.¹⁴ Predating Keith Joseph’s and the Adam Smith Institute’s later analysis, education, it was alleged, had become a vast ‘interest’ in which the

¹¹ The phrase, ‘economic evangelicals’, was used by William Keegan to describe the coalition of interests that initially ‘hi-jacked’ the economic policy of the Conservative Party. See Keegan, W. (1984) *Mrs Thatcher’s Economic Experiment*. London: Allen Lane, p. 33 and passim. ‘Cultural restorationists’ is used by Stephen Ball in Ball, *Politics and Policy Making*, p. 6 and passim.

¹² Quoted in Knight, *Tory Education Policy*, p. 123.

¹³ Quoted in Salter and Tapper, *Power and Politics*, p. 171.

¹⁴ Maurice Cowling identified ‘the educational movement which derives from the Black Papers’ as one of the ‘five faces’ of the New Right, attracting ‘attention from school teachers and the media and, while having virtually no organisation and making no impact on policy, had a considerable impact on public debate’. Cowling, *Mill and Liberalism*, p. xxiii.

concerns of educationalists, administrators and politicians had developed their own dynamic, which carried on regardless of the experiences and views of pupils and parents.

The polemic of the New Right in general has been characterised as ‘populist. . .an indigent retreat into common sense, a dislike of experts, Civil Servants, do-gooders, and intellectuals’.¹⁵ The Black Papers were the epitome of these traits, with a deliberate attempt to make them accessible to a wide readership.¹⁶ They were essentially short, accessible essays. Although many of their specific claims were refuted, these were never really essential to the Black Papers’ popular impact, whose simplistic assertions struck home far more effectively than the often laboured and lugubrious refutations subsequently printed. The authorship of the Papers had also emerged from and encouraged the phenomenon that would reappear with a vengeance during the 1980s, the ‘networking’ of various pressure groups, think tanks, and individuals, which overlapped each other, and also both wings of the burgeoning New Right within and without the Conservative Party.¹⁷ Despite the often impressive and official-sounding names of many of these groups, they were basically ‘mutual support’ agencies, with a small core of people setting up or supporting a plurality of organisations with similar ideologies and membership lists. The degree of ‘activism’ of these groups can vary and most participants vehemently deny any attempt at co-ordination. As Rhodes Boyson claims, ‘the left has always been better linked than the right’¹⁸ and there is a sense of some being, as described by John Barnes, simply ‘a loose nexus of persons, linked by friendship and association’.¹⁹ Dennis O’Keeffe, author of pamphlets for both the Social Affairs Unit and the Adam Smith Institute, suggests that even this was haphazard. According to O’Keeffe, their association ‘certainly wasn’t planned, even as a

¹⁵ O’Gorman, F. (1986) *British Conservatism*. New York: Longman, p. 56.

¹⁶ This was not always the case with ‘counter-revolutionary’ arguments. In the economic sphere, writers such as Peter Jay in *The Times* were little concerned to connect with a wider audience. The story is told about a sub-editor on *The Times* who questioned whether one of Jay’s articles would be fully understood by readers, only to be met with the withering reply that his (Jay’s) article ‘was written for three people and you are not one of them’. *The Times*, 7 February 1998.

¹⁷ The composition and background to many of these groups can be found in, ‘Pressure Groups: Right Thinking People’, *Labour Research*, February 1984; Griggs, ‘The New Right and English Secondary Education’, pp. 99 - 128; Knight, *Tory Education Policy*; P. Wilby and S. Midgley, ‘As the New Right wields its power’, *The Independent*, 23 July 1987.

¹⁸ Rhodes Boyson interview, 25 January 1994.

“loose nexus”. It was more a case of a beleaguered and sympathetic group of intellectuals who often found themselves working towards the same ends’.²⁰

One of the main influences in bringing the themes of these nascent groupings of *irregulars* to greater public attention was the media campaign in the 1970s which appeared to portray the education system as being in ‘crisis’. According to Ball, ‘By the early 1970s, fuelled by press and television “horror stories”, the level of “public concern” about the state of the nation’s schooling had reached the level of moral panic’.²¹ In Britain, this sense of ‘moral panic’ was part of a broader concern termed ‘The Debate about Standards’.²² Rhodes Boyson’s *The Crisis in Education* appeared in 1975, as did the fifth Black Paper, and *The Rape of Reason* by Caroline Cox, John Marks and Keith Jacka, about their experiences in the Polytechnic of North London. 1975 also witnessed the furore over the William Tyndale Primary School. Such a high-profile scandal provided an almost indefensible indictment of a style of progressive education, albeit one that had been taken to extremes.²³ It also proved grist to the mill of individuals such as Rhodes Boyson, who could claim with some justification, even before Callaghan’s Ruskin speech, that ‘the forces of the right in education are on the offensive. The blood is flowing from the other side now’.²⁴

¹⁹ Knight, *Tory Education Policy*, p. 98.

²⁰ Dennis O’Keeffe interview, 29 October 1998. As an earlier example of this, Crook describes how, despite the appearance of the Black Papers, which further highlighted the gap that had opened between the right of the Conservative Party and Edward Boyle, their spokesman on Education, Boyle’s ‘ideological opponents were less coherent and organized than is often supposed’. In a letter to Boyle, Brian Cox, co-editor of the first Black Papers, wrote that ‘Most of the B.P. contributors have never met each other. . . . We are free men expressing our views freely’. Crook, D. ‘Edward Boyle: Conservative champion of comprehensives?’ *History of Education*, 1993, Vol. 22, No. 1, p. 59.

²¹ Ball, S. (1984) *Comprehensive Schooling, A Reader*. Lewes: Falmer Press, p. 6.

²² This debate, as with many other later developments, had direct parallels with the experience in the United States. Ira Shor has described the groundswell of public disquiet and unease that led to what he described as the ‘conservative restoration’ in education in the States. ‘In education’, wrote Shor, ‘as in any other part of society subjected to restoration, there is a conservative ideology underlying the reversal of the 1960s... The conservative language for this reversal pits “quality” against “equality”. Restoration policy promotes itself as the defender of “excellence” and “high standards”’. Shor, I. (1986) *Culture Wars*. Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul plc., p. 7. For an excellent account of the ‘Debate about Standards’ in Britain at this time, see Whitehead, P. (1985) *The Writing on the Wall. Britain in the Seventies*. London: Michael Joseph Limited, especially Ch. 10.

²³ ‘The progressives’, wrote Stuart Maclure, ‘got too far ahead of the game and opened the door for the education reactionaries whose strident voices struck a chord in public and political opinion’. Maclure, S. (1985) ‘40 Years On’. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, Vol. 23, No. 2, June, p. 121.

²⁴ *TES*, 21 May 1976.

The Road to Ruskin – the *Regulars*

A powerful central authority within the education system was not so much emasculated by the 1944 Act as stillborn. In policy analysis terms, for at least two decades after the 1944 Education Act, the interplay between the Education department, the LEAs and the teacher unions strongly resembled a ‘clientelist’ system, with two latter participants exerting the major influence on policy. Although the majority of central government departments in Britain ‘were and have remained non-executant units’, with very much ‘hands-off’ control of services,²⁵ the extent to which the DES was subservient to what were, in effect, its client groups, meant that even within the Whitehall ‘village’, education was perceived as a different kind of berth. Maurice Kogan, a former Assistant Secretary, noted how,

Within the Civil Service it is regarded as a little separate, having the appearance of a vice royalty, something akin to the style of the British raj in India, a prestigious part of the main system but somewhat remote from it. . .the Civil Servants in the Department have not been in the mainstream of Whitehall.²⁶

Not only were the officials in the Department seen as not being in the mainstream, but there was also the suspicion that, as described by one official, they were ‘in cahoots with the LEAs in a conspiracy against the laity’.²⁷ By common consent, the majority of senior officials within the Department were ‘very intellectual, very bright, and delighted in submitting very erudite submissions to ministers’.²⁸ This latter trait, described by one official as ‘literacy practised to a fault’,²⁹ was of course not necessarily viewed with admiration by

²⁵ Rhodes, R.A. ‘Changing Intergovernmental Relations’, in Cloke, P. (1989) (ed.) *Policy and Change in Thatcher’s Britain*. Oxford: Pergamon Press, p. 56.

²⁶ Kogan, M. (1978) *The Politics of Educational Change*. Manchester: Manchester University Press p. 150.

²⁷ John Hedger interview, 18 February 1999.

²⁸ Jennifer Bacon interview, 28 May 1998.

²⁹ Owen interview.

all who came into contact with it. 'Ulrich could weave a short little minute into a two hour All Souls Seminar', complained one junior minister.³⁰ This obfuscation may have been frustrating, but was hardly unique to the DES. Of more serious import was the lack of initiative, or even the scope for initiative, within the Department. According to Geoffrey Holland, Permanent Secretary between 1992 and 1993, 'It (the DES) was very good at criticising and critical analysis, but it simply had no idea of how to get anything off the ground. It was lacking in any understanding or experience of actually making things happen'.³¹ The major contributing factor to this state of affairs and what set Education apart from other Whitehall departments, was the continued lack of overt political content in the Department's work, and its lack of control and influence over what in other departments would be seen as client groups.

For much of the post-war period the main priority of the DES had been that of providing 'roofs over heads'. As described by Walter Ulrich, Deputy Secretary at the DES between 1976 and 1988,

During the period between the end of the war and the early 1970s the government saw its principal role and aim the provision of school places. . .No one really disputed this policy and the consensus meant that the LEAs, the Churches and the teacher unions could largely work amicably together. The main divisive issue in this process was of course the structure of secondary education... governments were little concerned with what was taught in schools or even with standards of pupil attainment.³²

In the above description by Ulrich, it is revealing that, by omission, the government and by extension the DES, appear above or outside the 'consensus' operated by the other 'partners'. Absorbed as it was with issues of resource allocation, the lack of influence inherent in the DES may have been less apparent

³⁰ Fallon interview. Walter Ulrich was a Deputy Secretary at the DES between 1976 and 1988.

³¹ Geoffrey Holland interview. 10 August 1998. One Under Secretary who joined the DES from the much more hands on Manpower Services Commission in the mid 1980s recalled how the DES was seen in the rest of Whitehall as the Department that operated by the use of 'rubber levers'. Bacon interview.

³² Walter Ulrich correspondence. 7 November 1997.

during the period when the policy-making process was described as that of ‘elite accommodation’. This process, in the oft-quoted description of Vernon Bogdanor, suggested that policy decisions were the fiefdom of ‘a troika consisting of Sir William Alexander, Secretary of the Association of Education Committees (AECs), Sir Ronald Gould, General Secretary of the NUT, and the Permanent Secretary at the Department for Education’.³³ This accommodation, notwithstanding the strong element of caricature acknowledged by Bogdanor in the preceding description, did not long survive the 1960s, with the different ‘partners’ beginning to stretch in different directions.³⁴ While Godwin has argued that, from this period, the DES was not as passive or as subservient on issues where it felt it could successfully intervene and gather power to the centre,³⁵ successive studies indicated the extent to which the LEAs had come adrift from central control,

not only on matters of style – for example, type of secondary education provided, the content of the curriculum and the age of transfer from primary...but also in terms of the amount of resources used in the education service, for example, teaching staff, age and standard of buildings, equipment and facilities.³⁶

³³ Bogdanor, V. (1979) ‘Power and Participation’, *Oxford Review of Education*, Vol. 5, No. 2, p. 161.

³⁴ A number of factors contributed to breaking up this tight knit community. The dominant position held by the NUT with regard teacher representation was undermined by other unions. The role of the AECs was to close as Local Authorities sought to provide and control their own brokerage with central government through bodies such as the education committees of the Association of County Councils (ACC) and the Association of Metropolitan Authorities (AMA). Changes in the grant funding arrangements with the introduction of General Grant (later to be superseded by the Rate Support Grant) ended the close scrutiny by the Department of LEA current expenditure.

³⁵ Writing of the erosion of ‘myth’ of the post-1944 Act’s pluralist system, and in particular the Department’s role in the National Advisory Council on Teacher Supply and Training, Godwin suggests that ‘already in the Act’s second decade the (pluralist) myth was coming under strain. The main consultative machinery for education policy started to malfunction in 1958 and imploded in 1965. Godwin, C. D. ‘Policy-making without partners: the NACTST and its demise 1965-73’. *History of Education*, 2003, Vol. 32, No. 1, p. 81. See also Godwin, C.D. ‘The origin of the Binary System’, *History of Education*, 1998, Vol. 27, No. 2, pp. 171-191.

³⁶ William Pile quoted in Ranson, S. ‘Changing Relations between Centre and Locality in Education’, in McNay, I. And Ozga, J. (1985) *Policy-Making in Education. The Breakdown of Consensus*. Oxford: Pergamon Press, pp. 103-123.

Mirroring the lack of control exerted by the central authority of the localities, LEAs in turn, effected little control with regard to the key future battleground of the curriculum, where it was assumed that lesson content and appropriate teaching methods were the professional responsibilities of teachers in schools. Writing in 1980, Denis Lawton described this cascading of responsibility:

The DES now has little formal control over the curriculum...LEAs, although technically responsible for the curriculum of schools, have traditionally (that is since 1945) left the control of the curriculum to governors who have normally left it to the headteachers who may or may not leave it to their assistants.³⁷

So everybody and nobody was in charge. This was often disguised or more accurately unquestioned within the various models that were used to describe educational policymaking. In 1976, Briault added a further development to the 'partnership' model inherent in the 1944 Act, by suggesting that the administration of schools could now be viewed as a 'triangle of tension' between central government, local government and the individual schools. This model was not necessarily antipathetic to the 'partnership' model. It merely recognised that there was or could be 'tension' or conflict between the partners. Even so, where there was conflict, the primary cause was the allocation of resources.

The Ruskin speech would publicly mark what would prove to be the start of a new phase in education policy, with the government now wishing to redefine its role and that of its main agent in the world of education, the DES. While it should always be borne in mind that the DES is not 'a thing, an entity in itself, but rather a changing amalgam of particular Civil Servants and inspectors', it is also the case that 'factions develop around particular issues'.³⁸ From 1976, there was a definite push from very senior officials for the Department to carve out a new, more authoritative role for itself. The first prominent figure to be identified with a new role for the DES was James Hamilton. Described as 'something of a whiz kid from the boffin rooms of aircraft research', Hamilton joined the DES in

³⁷ Lawton, D. (1980) *The Politics of the School Curriculum*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, pp. 8-10.

³⁸ Ball, *Politics and Policy Making*, p. 137.

1976 from the Cabinet Office where he had impressed Bernard Donoghue in the Policy Unit as ‘engagingly positive’.³⁹ Hamilton’s unorthodox Civil Service career and approach also impressed Callaghan who probably felt that his outsider’s perspective and his dynamic approach were things that could be put to good use in the DES. Hamilton’s immediate experience on joining the Department was unswervingly typical. On arriving, he found it ‘full of “lifers”’,

officials who looked inward in the sense of looking to local authorities much more than to the rest of Whitehall, from which it was emotionally and geographically separate. They had spent their whole lives in the DES and there was a great tendency to look back in history and when something was proposed someone would inevitably say, “Oh we tried that back in whenever and it didn’t work then and it wouldn’t work now.” What was needed was people who were less bewitched by the local authorities. The great seachange had to be moving power from the local authorities into the DES.⁴⁰

Nor was Hamilton reticent at the time in expressing his intentions. In his first public announcement at the Conference of the Association of Education Committees in 1976, he stated that his department would be taking ‘a much closer interest’ in what was taught in schools, ‘in the curriculum in its widest sense, the assessment of performance, and even the relationship of teaching methods to performance’.⁴¹

A key document in this strategy was the *Yellow Book*. In preparing the ground for Ruskin, in May 1976 Callaghan had asked Fred Mulley, then Education Secretary, to have his department prepare a report on particular areas of concern: the teaching of the three Rs in the primary school, the curriculum for older children in comprehensive schools, the examination system and the general difficulties facing 16-19 year olds. On arriving at the DES the following month,

³⁹ Fletcher, J. (1995) ‘Policy Making in DES/DfE via Consensus and Contention’. *Oxford Review of Education*, Vol. 21, No. 2, p. 139. Hennessey described Hamilton as ‘the first professional post-Fulton to tread that open road to the very top’ and ‘that rare phenomenon among Civil Servants, a man as good on paper as on his slide rule’. Hennessey, P. (1989) *Whitehall*. London: Fontana Press edition, 1990, p. 203.

⁴⁰ Hamilton interview.

one of the first things Hamilton did was to set the preparation for the report in motion. The subsequent *Prime Minister's Memorandum*, dubbed the *Yellow Book*, formed the briefing paper for the Ruskin speech. Having been involved initially in setting this hare running at Cabinet Office, Hamilton had to try and make sure that it would not be sidetracked in his new department. Controlling the contents of the report would be crucial. 'What I was able to do', recalled Hamilton, 'was to provide a very clear brief as to what we wanted. I was then able to check on its progress having told the officials writing the *Yellow Book* to be totally open and frank, as they had been used to writing guarded notes for fear of upsetting their superiors, or their clients, or both'.⁴²

The officials certainly took their new Permanent Secretary's wishes to heart. Starting with primary schools, the memorandum first pointed the finger at the 'child centred' approach, suggesting 'the time is almost certainly ripe for a corrective shift of emphasis'.⁴³ Nor were secondary teachers to be spared. As well as too many teachers not having the right qualifications, 'In an almost desperate attempt to modify styles of teaching and learning so as to capture the imagination and enlist the co-operation of their more difficult pupils, some (teachers) have possibly been ready to drop their sights in setting standards of performance'. Further concern was expressed regarding 'the variation in the curriculum followed by pupils in different schools or parts of the country'. 'The time has probably come', said the memorandum, 'to try and establish generally accepted principles for the composition of the secondary curriculum for all pupils, that is to say a "core curriculum"'. The final paragraph of the *Yellow Book*, proposing the next steps was unequivocal, one could almost say Hamiltonian: 'It will also be good to get on record from Ministers and in particular the Prime Minister, an authoritative pronouncement on the division of responsibility for what goes on in schools...The climate for a declaration on these lines may in fact now be entirely favourable. Nor need there be any inhibition for fear that the Department could not make use of enhanced opportunity to exercise influence over curriculum and teaching methods'.⁴⁴

⁴¹ *TES*, 2 July 1976.

⁴² Hamilton interview.

⁴³ DES (1976) *Prime Minister's Memorandum*, p. 7 and passim.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

Although DES officials were responsible for the *Yellow Book*, senior members of Her Majesty's Inspectorate (HMI) were also heavily involved.⁴⁵ It is not difficult to imagine that there was a great deal of accord between the DES officials and the HMIs. Both had a vested interest in changing the status quo, and indeed, the *Yellow Book* stated that assisting in the 'enhanced opportunity to exercise influence over curriculum and teaching' would be none other than Her Majesty's Inspectorate. Described as 'without doubt the most powerful single agency to influence what goes on in schools', HMI were to have 'a leading role to play in bringing forward ideas in these areas and is ready to fulfil that responsibility'.⁴⁶ Work already begun to try and achieve this by HMI and Sheila Browne in particular, who had been appointed Senior Chief Inspector in 1974. In an interview with the *TES* soon after her appointment, the first occasion on which a senior HMI had done so, she talked of the 'basic educational right of all children' and expressed the view that while supporting the work of the professionals, 'At the same time we can feed the evidence and our interpretations into policy makers – though it may be hard to get the policy makers to hear what they don't want to know'.⁴⁷ In the short term this latter point was of little concern although it would eventually come back to haunt Browne's successor as SCI, Eric Bolton. In the meantime, planning work began on new national surveys, one on primary schools and one on secondary, the results of which would provide further impetus and justification for intervention by the centre.

The contents of the *Yellow Book*, which were leaked to the press, were almost as significant in their own way as Callaghan's subsequent speech. Peter Wilby, then a correspondent on *The Times*, remembered how,

During the 1960s and into the 70s there was a feeling that education belonged on the women's pages. There were stories to be found about individual schools rather than about education at a macro level. There

⁴⁵ Dunford, J. (1998) *Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Schools since 1944. Standard Bearers or Turbulent Priests?* London: Woburn Press, p. 154.

⁴⁶ DES, *Prime Minister's Memorandum*, p.15. In what would seem a not unreasonable criticism, a much aggrieved chairman of the Schools Council, Sir Alex Smith, suggested that 'were I the recipient of this report, my immediate reaction would be to ask what, if the weakness in schools summarised in the report exist, this "most powerful single agency"... has been doing during the decade or two during which these weaknesses have been developing'. Quoted in Dunford, *Standard Bearers or Turbulent Priests?* p. 154.

was little need to talk to people at the Department for Education and Science. Nor for that matter was education seen even as a matter for parents. I once proposed to Frank Giles a leader page on the school curriculum but was told that it was really a matter for schoolmasters. The Black Papers helped to change all that. Along with the Black Papers was there was also the leaking of the *Yellow Book* in which it appeared that for the first time Her Majesty's Inspectorate were suggesting that all was not well in schools. Until then, whatever coverage there had been was by and large positive, helpful, worthy and dull.⁴⁸

Combined with the impact of the Ruskin speech, after 1976, it was increasingly unlikely that education coverage would remain 'positive, helpful, worthy and dull'. Not only that, but it appeared that the *irregulars* had discovered an unlikely ally in their desire to instigate education reforms.

The Road to Ruskin – the *Politicos*

On 18 October 1976, James Callaghan delivered his well-documented speech at Ruskin College, Oxford. In the speech, Callaghan called for schools to pay more attention to preparing pupils for working life, to reconsider the curriculum and teaching methods, and to be more willing to share curriculum concerns with parents and the public. It also called for a core curriculum, a more interventionist role for the DES and the HMI, and more lay influence through governing bodies.⁴⁹ The speech itself was an accurate reflection of the convergence of concerns about the schools system that had been gaining momentum during the previous years. While many of these concerns shared a general diagnosis that something was rotten with the state of education, their suggested remedies, more central control or more free market 'discipline', appeared difficult to reconcile. It

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 143.

⁴⁸ Peter Wilby interview, 25 February 1998. Frank Giles was then editor of *The Times*.

⁴⁹ How radical Callaghan's intervention in the area of the curriculum alone can be judged by the fact that even as the speech was in gestation, a study of the Schools Council, at that time the most influential body on curriculum matters, was published which confidently asserted that, 'It is remarkable how firmly entrenched now is the pure twentieth century dogma that the curriculum is a thing to be planned by teachers and by other educational professionals alone and that the

would be the responsibility of the politicians to provide a coherent and resolute way forward. Past performance did not yield much cause for optimism.

The anomalous and unenviable position ‘of a Department without its own policy and without the means to implement policy’⁵⁰ tended to lessen the appeal of the DES to ambitious politicians. So much so that Maurice Kogan remarked how ‘No politician worth his salt could contemplate office in the Ministry of Education for long because it lacked. . .newsworthiness’.⁵¹ Between 1944 and 1976, 17 Secretaries of State came and went at the Department, an average of 15 months each. Prior to Sir Keith Joseph in 1981, only one of these incumbents had made any serious attempt to get to grips with the lack of control and direction endemic in the school curriculum. During his first term at the Department from 1954 to 1957, the Conservative, Sir David Eccles, soon ‘received the impression that there had been an increase in the scale of education but not in its quality’.⁵² Two years after he returned, in 1962, and without any prior consultation, he established a Curriculum Study Group within the Ministry. Despite the earlier rhetoric, and although perhaps radical for its time, Eccles’ vision for the Group was not a grand one. Led by HMIs, it was to have been ‘a relatively small “commando-like unit”, making raids into the curriculum’.⁵³ It was not to be.

State’s first duty in this matter is to maximise teacher autonomy and freedom’. Quoted in Simon, *Education and the Social Order*, pp. 311-2.

⁵⁰ Lawton, D. (1986) ‘The Department of Education and Science: Policy Making at the Centre’, in Hartnett, A. and Naish, M. (eds.) *Education and Society Today*, p. 23.

⁵¹ Kogan, M. (1975) *The Politics of Educational Change*. London: Fontana, p. 29. For someone with as keen a sense of newsworthiness and career enhancement as Roy Jenkins, even the lure of promotion into the Cabinet as Education Secretary was insufficient. In his memoirs, Jenkins recalled how, following the reshuffle caused by Patrick Gordon-Walker’s failure to win the by-election in Leyton in January 1965, he was offered the post of Education Secretary. At that time Jenkins had a post outside the Cabinet as Minister for Aviation and had been hoping for better things. Writing of his meeting with Harold Wilson when the offer was made, Jenkins described how ‘After my brief journey through the sky in the Foreign Office comet I was inevitably in a mood of let-down and disappointment. Independently of this, however, I was not vastly attracted by the Department of Education. My mind was not on its problems and I was not stimulated by the thought of them’. After thinking the offer over, Jenkins declined, with Anthony Crosland eventually accepting the post. Jenkins, R. (1991) *A Life at the Centre*. London: Macmillan, pp. 169-70.

⁵² Quoted in Gordon, P, Aldrich, R, Dean, D. (1991) *Education and Policy in England in the Twentieth Century*. London: The Woburn Press, p. 65. It was Eccles who first used the term ‘secret garden’ to describe the school curriculum, a phrase which was consciously echoed by James Callaghan and James Hamilton in 1976. In his speech to the AECs in 1976 Hamilton said that he believed ‘the so-called secret garden of the curriculum cannot be allowed to remain so secret after all, and that key must be found and turned’. *TES*, 2 July 1976.

⁵³ Manzer, R. (1970) *Teachers and Politics: The Role of the National Union of Teachers in the Making of National Educational Policy in England and Wales since 1944*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, p. 91.

Faced with the implacable hostility of the unions and the LEAs, Eccles' successor, Sir Edward Boyle, replaced the Curriculum Study Group with the teacher-dominated Schools Council.

However limited, Eccles' attempt at intervention was positively dynamic compared to the approach of many of his successors. In their celebrated interviews with Maurice Kogan, both Anthony Crosland and Edward Boyle were at pains to insist just how unpoliticised were certain aspects of education policy. Speaking of the Secretary of State's impact on the internal organisation of schools and the curriculum, Crosland told Kogan that 'The only influence is an indirect one that is exercised through HMIs' and through sponsored research projects. . . The nearer one comes to the professional content of education, the more indirect the minister's influence is', adding, 'and I'm sure this is right'.⁵⁴ His shadow on the Conservative side, Edward Boyle, was equally tentative when it came to a strategic view of the Department. Although slightly tinged with blue around the edges on issues such as selection, Boyle was essentially non-doctrinaire in his approach. So much so that he has been described as 'the best example of a Conservative who pushed rational pragmatism so far that many condemned him for ceasing to be a Conservative'.⁵⁵ Such an approach infuriated his colleagues in the Conservative Party who wished to try and stem what they perceived as the pernicious tide of progressive education and its attendant decline in standards. Although not the most temperate of observers, Sir Rhodes Boyson described Boyle as 'the most permissive minister he ever knew' and so violent were their disagreements that he eventually 'couldn't bear to be in the same room as him'.⁵⁶

Boyson himself was appointed junior education spokesman for the Conservatives in 1976. 'During the 1970s', he recalled, 'there were no set aims other than to kick back instinctively'.⁵⁷ Even so, the kicking began to get a good

⁵⁴ Kogan, M. (1971) *The Politics of Education. Edward Boyle and Anthony Crosland in conversation with Maurice Kogan*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., p. 172. Even the famous *Circular 10/65* 'requested' rather than 'required' local authorities to go comprehensive and was written after discussions with the local authority associations. Ibid., p. 45.

⁵⁵ Lawton, D. (1994) *The Conservative Mind on Education. 1979-94*. London: The Falmer Press, p. 30. For an account of Boyle's difficulties with the right of his Party over his stance on comprehensive reorganisation, see Crook, 'Edward Boyle: Conservative champion of comprehensives?' pp. 49-62.

⁵⁶ Boyson interview.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

deal more vigorous after 1974 when Norman St John Stevas replaced Edward Boyle as shadow Education Secretary. Stevas was a high Tory on most issues, except education, where he held views deemed to be right wing:

I was sceptical about the advantages claimed for comprehensive education, believed in the upholding of high standards, the preservation of the grammar schools and the affording of opportunities to the bright child of modest background through the network of direct grant schools.⁵⁸

Even so, Stevas' ambitions were much too modest for his junior spokesman. Presaging later conflicts between Conservative ministers, the Boyson-Stevas partnership - no more than the Boyson-Boyle and later Boyson-Carlisle and Boyson-Keith Joseph partnerships - was not a happy one. Boyson was and would remain an unreconstructed populist, intolerant and dismissive of those not completely in tune with his view. He was made for opposition. Stevas later recalled that 'We did not work happily together and, looking back, I regret that I did not make greater efforts if not to bridge the gap, then at least to narrow it'.⁵⁹ Stevas, the 'colourful' high Tory, no doubt found Boyson's unremitting and increasingly-strident populism at the very least distasteful, and certainly disloyal. By 1979, Stevas had had enough of the education world. He later wrote that 'I spent five years on it (education policy) going into questions of standards etc. Of course I could have become Secretary of State for Education but I'd really had enough if it – you know how obsessive education people are'.⁶⁰ Although Boyson's 'obsessiveness' was pretty extreme, the disputes between him and Stevas, and later with Carlisle and Keith Joseph, were early symptoms, even in opposition, of the lack of clarity in Conservative policy.

To her undying chagrin, Mrs Thatcher herself had remained a good and faithful servant to the status quo, even if her tenure as Education Secretary between 1970 and 1974 was punctuated by a series of nods and winks to the burgeoning right wing counter-revolution.⁶¹ Even her swift replacement of

⁵⁸ St John-Stevas, N. (1984) *The Two Cities*, London: Faber and Faber, p. 16.

⁵⁹ Ibid., pp. 17-18.

⁶⁰ *The Guardian*, 16 October 2001.

⁶¹ See Knight, *Tory Education Policy*, p. 62 and passim.

Circular 10/65 with *Circular 10/70* was described as ‘a declaratory gesture of little practical consequence’,⁶² with many local authorities already in the advanced stage of planning for comprehensivisation. The tenures of Reg Prentice and Fred Mulley between 1974 and 1976 probably marked the apotheosis of ministerial inertia and disinterest. Mulley told his newly-appointed Permanent Secretary in 1976, James Hamilton, that ‘the 1944 Act only gave the Secretary of State one power, which was to demolish air raid shelters in schools’,⁶³ a power that was not in great demand in the mid-1970s. Callaghan quickly become convinced that Mulley was not the right person to lead on education and replaced him with Shirley Williams.⁶⁴

Once talked of as possibly Britain’s first female Prime Minister, if anyone was ever presented with a platform on which to display her credentials for the top job, it was Shirley Williams, in 1976. Into her lap would fall a populist initiative, launched by the Prime Minister, and with a sympathetic and dynamic Permanent Secretary already installed in her department, ready and eager to do battle. That she would apparently fail to grasp her big opportunity was largely due to personal and political failings, although she certainly did not have much of a template on which to work in terms of being a reforming Secretary of State for Education. She herself was described as displaying an ‘inability or unwillingness to appropriate opportunities or channel the considerable political and governmental interests in education towards consolidation into wide ranging schemes’.⁶⁵ Less prosaically, James Callaghan was reported to have felt that Williams was ‘warm, sincere, invariably eager to see the best in everybody, but in the end lacking in ruthlessness’.⁶⁶

⁶² Campbell, J. (2000) *Margaret Thatcher. Volume One: The Grocer’s Daughter*. London: Jonathan Cape, p. 223. As proof that fate does have a sense of humour, Mrs Thatcher wrote to a supporter on her departure in 1974 that she would ‘always retain my interest in education, and I hope that one day I may be able to do something for it once again’. *Ibid.*, p. 256.

⁶³ Hamilton interview.

⁶⁴ Callaghan later recalled that when he told Mulley he intended to make a contribution to the public disquiet on education by making a big speech: ‘Fred rather blanched. He went back to his department and got even more upset’. *TES*, 11 October 1996.

⁶⁵ Batteson, C. (1997) ‘A Review of Politics of Education in the Moment of 1976’. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, Vol. 45, No. 4, p. 372.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 373.

Conclusion - The Road from Ruskin

The subsequent ‘Great Debate’ initiated by Callaghan in 1976 was invariably described as neither ‘great’ nor a ‘debate’, although it did provide a stream of documents, many of which laid the groundwork for the eventual decision to legislate for a national curriculum. The least interesting of the documents was perhaps the Green Paper, *Education in Schools; A Consultative Document*.⁶⁷ A key suggestion in the Green Paper however, was ‘the intention of the Secretary of State to ask local authorities and teachers’ associations to review curricular arrangements in each local authority area’. In November 1977, *Circular 14/77* was duly published. The replies eventually received from the LEAs to *Circular 14/77*, many of which were described at the time as ‘politely worded nil returns’,⁶⁸ while probably expected, were none the less depressing for it. ‘On the evidence of the replies’, noted the DES with nice understatement, ‘many authorities need to increase their working knowledge of what goes on in their schools’.⁶⁹ HMI were then ‘invited’ to ‘formulate a view of a possible curriculum’ to be circulated in early 1980. Other ‘pieces of groundwork’ were also put in place with HMI reports on primary and secondary schools.

Despite the hard evidence that was beginning to accumulate, with this great paper chase, without the political will to act, it would be to little avail. Recalling one instance, when, on the back of the evidence from HMI about the parlous state of teachers’ skills and qualifications, James Hamilton described how

⁶⁷ While the preparation of the *Yellow Book* was very much an in-house affair and closely controlled by Hamilton, he was unable to exercise the same control over *Education in Schools*. ‘Shirley Williams sent up the draft of the Green Paper against my better judgement’, recalled Hamilton, ‘Bernard Donoghue then rang up and said he wasn’t happy either. I of course agreed with him and the Paper was sent back’. Hamilton interview.

⁶⁸ Maw, J. ‘National Curriculum Policy: coherence and progression?’ in Lawton, D. and Chitty, C. (eds.) (1988) *The National Curriculum*. (Bedford Way Paper 33). London: Institute of Education, p. 51.

⁶⁹ DES (1979) *Local Authority Arrangements for the School Curriculum: Report on the Circular 14/77 Review*. London: HMSO, p. 2. A nice irony related to *Circular 14/77* was that only one LEA, Kingston-upon-Thames, refused to answer the questionnaire, stating that ‘some questions were about things the DES had no real need to know and cut across local autonomy’. The Chairman of the Education Committee at the time was none other than Angela Rumbold, later Minister of State at the DES during the formulation and passage of the 1988 Reform Bill. Dunford, *Turbulent Priests*, p. 158.

I got Shirley Williams to put her name to a Bill allowing the Department to earmark funds for in-service training but it was defeated by the local authorities using political pressure. I told them that they had won the battle but they would lose the war. And so it was to prove, but it would take a change in the political climate to achieve this.⁷⁰

In the interim, the skirmishing would continue. Although frustrated, the *regulars* could bide their time. ‘There was no time frame involved’, said Hamilton, ‘We had to play it by ear given the politics and relationships between central and local government at that time. I was very conscious that we would fail in whatever we were trying to do if the local authorities were to “withdraw their labour”. All we could do was to keep the thing moving along’.⁷¹

The *TES* described the arguments that were put forward in the *Yellow Book* as demonstrating that the DES was fairly ruthlessly placing itself ‘squarely among the mixed bag of critics and predators’ bent on destroying the power of the post-war “partners” in education policy, the local education authorities, and the teachers’.⁷² Callaghan’s subsequent speech had given a legitimacy to the faultlines that had appeared in the education settlement and its critics, the *irregulars*, would not be slow in attempting to exploit them. Although few major changes were immediately discernible, ‘a significant ideological shift had been achieved. There was a new kind of consensus in political discussion about education, a consensus of concern which spanned conventional left-right divisions’.⁷³ Within the ranks of the *irregulars*, this consensus was still centred upon criticisms of the existing system rather than alternatives.⁷⁴

Prior to 1979, many of the contradictions surrounding the rhetoric of Conservative education policy did not really matter. In many ways, they were a source of strength. When the focus was on opposition to the status quo, the more

⁷⁰ Hamilton interview.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² *TES*, 28 April 1983.

⁷³ Whitty and Menter, ‘Lessons of Thatcherism’, p. 43.

⁷⁴ According to Knight, ‘Until 1979 the role of the Conservative Educationists in promoting quality in education and parental choice of school had been largely restricted to populist exhortations’, with the demands for ‘educational excellence’ seen ‘as more a defence of the citadels of academia rather than a serious contribution to improving the school system’. Knight, *Tory Education Policy*, p. 135.

avenues of attack available, the better. The attack on comprehensives may have been sufficient to unite the disparate elements in and around the Conservative Party that were interested in education, but it was a potentially fissiparous unity. John Barnes characterised the situation in saying that ‘By 1979 the main strands within the Party had reached an accommodation. This was more of a settlement rather than a consensus’.⁷⁵ It remained to be seen as to whom, if anyone, could provide some flesh on the bones of this settlement.

The experience of the education policy community from the mid-1970s onwards, was, in many respects, not that different from other policy communities. Writing of central and local government relations in general during this period, Rhodes described how ‘With deepening economic decline, an increasingly unstable external support system and a shift in central elite ideology, there was a quantum leap in politicisation’.⁷⁶ Education, however, had a few extra twists: as well as the straightforward neo-liberal argument for cutting public spending, comprehensive schooling, one of the central planks of education policy, provided a strong focal point for ideological attacks. In formulating these attacks, the combined role of the *irregulars*, albeit a relatively small number of groups and individuals, was not dissimilar to that of an ‘issue network’. As described by Heclo, this was ‘a communications network of those interested in policy in some area...A lively issue network constantly communicates criticisms of policy and generates ideas for new policy initiatives’.⁷⁷ This emergence of indeed a very ‘lively’ and very hostile ‘issue network’ also coincided with the attempt by a central government agency, the DES, for a somewhat different set of reasons, to increase its influence within the policy community. With the election of a self-proclaimed radical government in 1979, the combination of this confluence of pressures all indicated the ending, or, at very least, a redefinition of the process of expansion and partnership that characterised the post-war period.

⁷⁵ John Barnes interview, 22 February 2000.

⁷⁶ Rhodes, ‘Changing Intergovernmental Relations’, p. 69.

⁷⁷ Heclo quoted in Marsh, D. and Rhodes, R. ‘Policy Networks in British Politics: A Critique of Existing Approaches,’ in Marsh, D. and Rhodes, R. (eds.) (1992) *Policy Networks in British Government*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 7.

CHAPTER 3

May 1979-September 1981: *At the margins*

Introduction

Given the challenges that she faced both within and without her Party in 1979, it was probably inevitable that Mrs Thatcher would have appointed a middle of the road, Mark Carlisle-like figure, as Secretary of State for Education. This was partly due to the attention of the new government being focused on its economic policy. Indeed there was nothing in the 1979 manifesto to suggest that a significant alteration of the structure of education was intended, with the aims for education being subsumed as part of a broader section under the title of ‘Helping the Family’.¹ This chapter examines how much progress the emerging agendas for education reform of both the *irregulars* and the *regulars* were able to make between 1979 and 1981. How far were the ‘populist exhortations’ by those on the right translated into something more concrete? How effective were advocates of reform, such as Stuart Sexton and Rhodes Boyson, now that they had official positions within the DES? While the stream of post-Ruskin documents continued uninterrupted during this period, how much impact were they having in term of addressing the issues raised by Ruskin?

The 24th and fourth ministers

Mark Carlisle the new Secretary of State for Education in 1981 was described at the time as a ‘tall, florid, utterly straightforward lawyer from the North of England’.² Whatever Carlisle’s ability in his capacity as a barrister, it is unlikely

¹ The 1979 Conservative Manifesto is available at <http://www.psr.keele.ac.uk/area/uk/man/edu>. In the autumn of 1978, when it was generally believed that James Callaghan was going to call a general election, the Conservatives had prepared a draft manifesto, *The Right Approach to Government*. It had more robust proposals for education and asserted that parents will ‘have more say in the education of their children and that much more is done to raise standards in our schools’ (p. 7) through ‘the extension of parental influence and choice’. The possibility of a voucher scheme was openly mentioned and the manifesto welcomed ‘local experiments to study the practical problems and potential advantages of the scheme’ (p. 41). The only surviving copy of the 1978 document is available on the Thatcher Foundation website at <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/>.

² *Sunday Times*, 6 May 1979.

that he would have made a good witness for the defence. When addressing the incongruity of a Secretary of State for Education who chose a private education for his own child, Carlisle asserted that he saw ‘absolutely nothing incompatible about supporting state education and sending your own children to a private school. For my own part, I always argued that I was lessening pressure on the state system by educating my daughter privately’.³ While the headteacher of Carlisle’s local comprehensive was no doubt grateful for the extra space made available by the new Secretary of State’s magnanimity, his political mistress would prove less gratified at his other decisions. Interviewed in 1997, Carlisle himself was still uncertain about why he was eventually moved by Mrs Thatcher. While accepting her political reasons,

I never understood what it was she was unhappy about. . .the Prime Minister never did come to the Department while I was there. She was planning to come at one stage, but something went wrong and the visit fell through...What I did say, and repeat again, is that I do not know what it was within the Department that had happened to cause any displeasure.⁴

It was, perhaps, not so much what had happened at the Department that caused Mrs Thatcher’s ‘displeasure’, as what had not happened. A decent, traditional figure, with little or no experience of the education system, Carlisle ‘like the good lawyer he was could present an efficient brief but without conviction’.⁵ Like John MacGregor, later on, he never really got to grips with the strong political and ideological undercurrents that had begun to swirl beneath the surface of education policy. Equally like MacGregor, it could be argued that Mrs Thatcher knew what type of figure she was appointing. It was therefore surprising that she was surprised when they behaved like everyone knew in advance they would behave. There is little evidence, other than indirectly through the appointment of figures like Boyson, that Mrs Thatcher gave much weight to education as an issue during the early years of her first administration.

³ Ribbins & Sheratt, *Radical Educational Policies*, p. 63.

⁴ Ibid., pp. 66-69.

⁵ Sexton interview.

She certainly gave little attention to her Secretary of State. Reports back from Cabinet meetings gave rise to the joke within the Department that Carlisle ‘spoke 24th in a Cabinet of 23’.⁶

If Carlisle is entirely honest with himself in suggesting that he did not know what caused Mrs Thatcher’s ‘displeasure’, then he must have been extraordinarily naïve, given the noises that Sexton as his adviser and Boyson, one of his junior ministers, were making. Even Mrs Thatcher, despite not visiting the Department, or willing to intervene directly, was not shy in dropping hints as to where her preferences lay. John Barnes recalled receiving a note from Downing Street. ‘Dear John’, it read, ‘I’m sending Mark Carlisle down to see how you do things in Kent. Margaret’.⁷ Kent was one of the local authorities that pioneered, albeit on a small scale, some of the initiatives that would eventually influence future education reform. While authorities like Cambridgeshire were experimenting with devolved budgets to schools, Kent had introduced a trial voucher scheme. The outcome was indecisive at best.⁸ Even if there were not to be a revolution in one county, the main provisions of the 1980 Education Act did, however, point in the direction of future reforms. Little commented upon at the time, in the shadow of its more controversial clauses, were the changes introduced relating to school governing bodies. Although these did not much effect governors’ powers, they did ensure that each school should have a governing body, and also set out new bases for membership with a minimum of two parents on each governing body. With hindsight, this can be seen as a first small step towards establishing an autonomous body, independent of the local education authority, which, in the future, could be responsible for running a school. Equally significant was that schools now had to publish examination results. In a speech in December 1980, Boyson defended the policy in strong neo-liberal terms. Published examination results were ‘the company ballot sheets of every school...available to parents who were investing in their children’s

⁶ David Forrester interview. 24 April 2002.

⁷ Barnes interview. John Hudson, Deputy Secretary at the time, described how Thatcher used to give Carlisle a rough time, chiding him that he had ‘been listening to those people in the Department. I know what they are like’. Interviewed in Davies-Griffith, ‘The development of education policy’, p. 154.

⁸ ‘We tried to put some of the building blocks for vouchers in place by breaking up catchment areas’, said Barnes, ‘but a big problem was that the key to choice in rural areas was transport. Eventually Kent got slightly cold feet as there was no underpinning by central government. We would have liked half a dozen local education authorities to put their heads over the parapet and introduce vouchers’. Barnes interview.

academic future'.⁹ A third change was that parents had the right to appeal against a council's choice of school for their children, as well as the right to send their children across local authority boundaries. Although this would have little immediate practical effect for the vast majority of families, it did identify the direction in which education reforms might go. It also helped to raise the political temperature and profile of education, as MPs' postbags began to reflect parental frustration. 'The political pressure over parental choice was enormous', recalled James Hamilton, 'and one of the Department's main activities was actually dealing with appeals'.¹⁰

Of much greater controversy at the time, however, was the introduction of the Assisted Places Scheme (APS). The Scheme introduced a means-tested scholarship that allowed bright students from state schools to take up places at fee-paying schools. In their respective accounts of the Scheme, both Salter and Tapper, and Edwards et al. trace its origins outside the party political network to the heads of the direct grant schools during the 1960s and early 1970s.¹¹ Salter and Tapper recount how, early in her term as Education Secretary, Mrs Thatcher was approached by members of the Direct Grant Joint Committee (DGJC) with a proposal for an Assisted Places Scheme. Not unreasonably, given the soundings she was making elsewhere, they felt that she would be sympathetic. Yet their proposal came to naught. While the representatives of the DGJC would not be the first to encounter Mrs Thatcher's brand of political pragmatism, at the time, it was felt that their rebuttal was the handiwork of DES officials, whose 'gloomy armour plate' appearance was noted in the minutes of the meeting.¹² As the subsequent Labour administration proceeded to abolish direct grant schools, many of which 'fled' into the private sector, there was 'frequent contact between the representatives of the independent sector and the Conservative Party. This resulted in a formal commitment by the Party to establish an APS that was incorporated into the 1979 General Election Manifesto'.¹³ The final version of

⁹ *Education*, 19 December 1980.

¹⁰ Hamilton interview.

¹¹ Edwards, T., Fitz, J. & Whitty, G. (1989) *The State and Private Education. An Evaluation of the Assisted Places Scheme*. Basingstoke: The Falmer Press, p. 6; Salter and Tapper, *Power and Policy*, pp. 186-88.

¹² Salter and Tapper, *Power and Policy*, p. 188.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 190.

the Scheme was then passed into statute as part of the 1980 Education (No. 2) Bill.

The most obvious pointer within the Scheme was the message that its very existence sent out, having set up a direct link between central government, private schools, and individual parents, in which local authorities had no part at all to play. This was an important qualitative shift in the parameters of the debate on policy. The Scheme also demonstrated how, on certain policy issues, both ‘wings’ of New Right educationists could find common ground, allowing them, despite their ideological differences, to present an effective front against any opposition. Aside from the common disdain for local authorities, in this case, there was also the veneration of the private sector. Yet even where there was this apparent agreement as to the efficacy of the private sector, one did not have to scratch very deeply to expose the fault-lines between the neo-liberals and neo-conservatives. This difference became more apparent after the 1988 Act and later took the form of arguments about whether the government should be concentrating on ‘structures’ or ‘standards’. Broadly speaking, for neo-conservatives, standards simply could not be left to any ‘invisible hand’, whether it was the market or otherwise. Moreover, standards were definable and known. Whether canons of literature or morals, they should be part of children’s education and often these standards were best preserved and/or transmitted through schools such as grammar schools and the ex-direct grant schools. Caroline Cox, whose support for a voucher-type scheme was seen as a way of strengthening the hand of parents rather than freeing schools, expressed some doubt as to ‘the limits of applicability of the market’.¹⁴ Given a choice between anarchy of an unregulated market or the ‘powerful tool’ of a national curriculum, she supported the latter on the basis that ‘The National Curriculum was the lesser of two evils’.¹⁵

For the neo-liberal reformers, those who preferred the wholesale introduction of market forces into the education system, ‘standards’ were merely a function of ‘structures’. Standards in schools would never rise, or rise sufficiently, unless the organising structure of education moved towards that of the free market. For this group, the operation of private schools provided the

¹⁴ Caroline Cox interview, 5 April 1994.

¹⁵ Boyd, A. (1998) *Baroness Cox. A Voice for the Voiceless*. Oxford: Lion Publishing. p. 410.

ideal model. Viewed as straightforward businesses, offering a service and responsive to market demands, if private schools failed to satisfy, or meet customer expectations, they went out of business, consistent with Hayek's 'creative destruction'. The fact that there were high academic standards in some of these schools was a factor of the competition in the market place. 'Standards', in this case, were not absolute or known. They were simply whatever the market demanded. So long as the school could find customers for their services, it did not matter what those services were. For someone like Stuart Sexton, 'The emphasis placed on independent schools was always about more than money. It was about management, about how they had to compete'.¹⁶

Such nuances were little commented upon during the early 1980s, and the APS found a niche for itself as a small, but significant totem in the rhetoric of education reform. Its practical impact may have been small but its existence symbolised 'a very clear demonstration of a lack of faith in state secondary schools and in the possibility of their being improved to the level of private schools'.¹⁷ From 1979, this message, or discourse, was now being carried on from within the DES itself, in particular through the appointment of Stuart Sexton as adviser to Mark Carlisle.¹⁸ Although he worked closely with Rhodes Boyson in opposition and in government, and shared many of his aims, Sexton was to prove much more politically astute than Boyson in working to secure change. Sexton had been an elected councillor in Croydon in the late 1960s and early 1970s:

In those days 'dry' Conservatives were interested in highways and 'wets' were interested in education and social services. I thought we ('dry' Conservatives) should become interested in these things even if only from the point of view of budgets, as education was the largest.¹⁹

¹⁶ Sexton interview.

¹⁷ Edwards et al., *The State and Private Education*, p. 1.

¹⁸ In 1973, Sexton wrote without success to Chris Patten, then Director of the Conservative Research Department, to ask for a position on the education desk. Two years later, after sending unsolicited advice on education policy to Stevas, Stevas appointed him in September 1975 as his education adviser, a role he would keep until 1986 under Mark Carlisle and Keith Joseph. During the period 1976-78 Sexton's role was divided between acting as 'official' adviser to Stevas and 'unofficial' speechwriter to Boyson. Details from Sexton interview; Knight, *Tory Education Policy*, p. 108 and Edwards et al. *The State and Private Education*, p. 34.

Sexton's association with the APS went back at least as far as 1976 when he was responsible for drafting an unsuccessful amendment to Labour's 1976 Education Bill that proposed the idea of a scheme. The notion was flagged up by Sexton again, writing under his own name, in the final *Black Paper* of the following year. Salter and Tapper describe Sexton as having had 'a strong personal commitment' to the APS and 'although the eventual scheme cannot be said to be his personal product he undoubtedly left his mark. His role is best described as that of the intellectual broker'.²⁰ Perhaps even more than an 'intellectual broker', Sexton also brought a strong ideological advocacy and clear-sighted commitment that was singularly lacking in his Secretary of State, and which many of his successors would also lack. 'What was new since 1979', recalled Peter Wilby, 'was there began to appear an actual debate about the type of education system we should have. Sexton was absolutely crucial in this'.²¹

For the researcher, Sexton can be a bit of a mixed blessing. While he is as indiscreet as he is disparaging about his former colleagues, he also has a strong tendency to claim for himself the decisive degree of influence on any particular aspect of education reform with which he was connected. Despite this, his contribution to influencing the direction of education reform was significant. He was unique among policy advisers in that he was in post almost continuously for over a decade, which provided him with a degree of expertise and insider knowledge, unequalled by his successors. While he was, in that sense, a specialist adviser, Sexton was also intensely political. This was both in the sense that he was ideologically committed to the application of market forces in education, but also, as described by John Clare, Sexton 'was very influential partly because he had an excellent idea of what was politically possible'.²² On occasion, what Sexton felt was 'politically possible' was not always felt to be politically desirable by his political bosses. Peter Wilby recalled that 'Sexton was much more than what we now call a "spin doctor". He had his own agenda and had a subtle way of letting you know that he disagreed with his minister while not being disloyal'.²³

¹⁹ Sexton interview.

²⁰ Salter and Tapper, *Power and Policy*, pp. 197-8.

²¹ Wilby interview.

²² John Clare interview, 14 November 1998.

²³ Wilby interview. Keith Joseph's exasperation with Sexton surfaced briefly in an interview with Stephen Ball. 'He (Sexton) was involved in everything', said Sir Keith, 'And seldom content with

Such subtlety, combined with frequent less subtle interventions, meant that Sexton was cordially disliked by officials at the DES. Aside from the actual policies that he would advocate, his relations with officials were also soured by their perception that his single-minded political approach made him essentially 'unsound', someone who could not be not be trusted to play by traditional Whitehall rules. Relationships with officials would also not have been helped by the fact that, in 1979, Sexton had loosely organised what he calls an 'advisers' Mafia'. This involved many of the politically-appointed advisers to ministers within the Conservative government meeting each month in Sexton's offices in Dean's Yard to informally discuss what was happening to government policy as a whole.²⁴ Sexton's single-minded pursuit of his own agenda also irritated anyone else trying to get the ear of ministers. Madsen Pirie, Director of the Adam Smith Institute, well aware of the key role of advisers in establishing a conduit to ministers, described the problem whereby 'the higher the profile of the adviser, the more they have an agenda of their own, the less effectively we can operate'.²⁵ Sexton certainly had an agenda of his own and one academic who interviewed him in connection with the Assisted Places Scheme felt that 'Sexton was the most hands-on adviser. He described himself as "the fourth minister" and operated as such'.²⁶ As an example of a committed hands-on adviser in operation, Clive Saville, the Civil Servant who, as Registrar for Independent Schools would be the most closely involved in drafting the legislation, described how

We were given a copy of the outline Assisted Places Scheme on day one. On day three I got hold of the original top sheet which made explicit that the policy was so devised to stop the "lefties" in the Department from obstructing ministers' wishes.²⁷

For a decade, from 1975, Sexton was at the centre of many debates and developments. His influence and activity was perhaps at its zenith during this

what I did, seldom content'. Ball, 'Political interviews and the politics of interviewing', pp. 107-8.

²⁴ Sexton interview.

²⁵ Pirie interview.

²⁶ Geoff Whitty interview, 29 May 1998.

²⁷ Saville interview. In a recent letter to *The Times* Sexton described how he 'wrote the Assisted Places Scheme', but it was the Secretary of State, not me, who instructed the Civil Servants to flesh out the detail and prepare the legislation'. *The Times*, 17 September 2003.

period of the late 1970s and early 1980s, operating under the pliable Carlisle. Some observers felt Sexton's influence very early after his arrival in the Department and that this was buttressed by having friends in high places. According to Wilby, 'he (Sexton) was trusted by the Prime Minister and recognised as the carrier of the one true way'.²⁸ The impression that it was Sexton, rather than Boyson, who was seen as 'Mrs Thatcher's man' in the Department, is further reinforced by John Hoskyns, Head of the Number Ten Policy Unit at this time. When he was later asked about education policy, Hoskyns replied that, 'When I was at the Policy Unit we did not deal with education policy at all. I think therefore you would get the information you require from Stuart Sexton'.²⁹ Yet the plight of Sexton was that, without the political will to back up expressions of support, for much of the time he was little better than a fifth columnist, a one-man ginger group within the Department. His successors would take a much less ambitious view of their role, and would neither be as knowledgeable nor as committed as he was to a radical education agenda.

The unbiddables

While Sexton operated from within the DES, the early 1980s also witnessed the further development of a 'networking' process that had begun during the 1970s. A number of what Robert Dunn, junior minister at the DES from 1983 to 1988, called the "believers", now began to infiltrate what were still the outskirts of the policy-making process.³⁰ In Thatcherite parlance, to be a 'believer' was to be 'one of us' or 'sound' with regard to education policy. Unsurprisingly, it was through the channel of the Centre for Policy Studies that some of these individuals first had an impact. Although the CPS Education Study Group would play host to a wide and fluid array of people, the two most prominent members who were in a position to influence the Thatcher governments would prove to be John Marks and Caroline, later Baroness, Cox. Before they both joined the Conservative Party in 1977, Caroline Cox had been a 'Fabian socialist' while

²⁸ Wilby interview.

²⁹ Knight, *Making of Tory Education Policy*, p. 148.

³⁰ Robert Dunn interview. 31 January 1994.

John Marks, had been a 'Gaitskellite member of the Labour Party'.³¹ The turbulent times they shared as academics at the Polytechnic of North London (PNL) led them to join the Conservative education campaign. Both adopted the Conservative cause with a zeal and unperturbability that only converts tend to exhibit. A 1988 profile in *The Times* commented on the zeal and energy of Lady Cox: 'All the most formidable and mysteriously named little groupings are to be found on the right [and] Lady Cox seems to be on the steering committee of almost every one of them...Lady Cox is one of the "link people" among the new Party groups. She represents a fresh and unbiddable element in the character of her Party'.³²

The same could be said of John Marks, who probably vies with Michael Fallon as the person who was most disliked by the education establishment. Even at the PNL, his billing was 'the most dislikable man in the Polytechnic'.³³ While Fallon was disliked for his abrasiveness unalloyed to any useful knowledge of education, Marks was disliked for his abrasiveness, combined with an in-depth knowledge of the education system. This allowed him to be a constant thorn in the side of officials and academics, while providing a constant challenge to prevailing orthodoxies. Described by one of his colleagues as the 'Solzhenitsyn of British education',³⁴ Marks remained an important influence with successive ministers through the 1980s and 90s. During the 1970s, both Cox and Marks were beginning to reach the same conclusions about schools as HMI were confirming in their national surveys, namely that, 'standards were too low and too variable'.³⁵ The main dilemma in addressing this perceived problem was the lack of hard evidence. There were little data available and a great reluctance of the part of anyone to release any more. According to Marks,

Within the system as a whole there was complacency about the changes that had taken place during the 1970s. As a parent and school governor any questioning was pretty unwelcome even at school level. When I asked at a meeting of the governing body for details of the examination

³¹ Knight, *Tory Education Policy*, pp. 114-115.

³² *The Times*, 5 May 1988.

³³ Boyd, *Voice for the Voiceless*, p. 45.

³⁴ O'Keeffe interview.

³⁵ John Marks interview, 23 March 1998.

results at the school at which I was governor, there was a shocked silence.³⁶

What was to change all this was the clause in the 1980 Education Act that required the publication of results. ‘This was absolutely crucial’, said Marks. Although the Department fought against it, ‘The requirement to publish examination results in the 1980 Bill was pushed through by Rhodes Boyson on the back of a speech by Mrs Thatcher which he was able to use against the Civil Servants. Everything turned on that requirement to publish, as prior to that you had to scabble around for data’.³⁷ The first fruits of this research would be *Standards in English Schools* published by the National Council for Educational Standards in 1983.

Although much of Cox and Marks’ research, including Marks’ later work on his own, can stand independent of politics, political affiliation with one party inevitably clouded how their work was perceived. Peter Wilby recalled that, ‘It was difficult to take them seriously at the time as they did not come at education from a schools sense. Marks was utterly charmless, utterly paranoid but good with figures. Both were seen as terribly marginal’.³⁸ For Civil Servants, they were contaminated by the same infection as Stuart Sexton. ‘I disliked the pair of them’, was the opinion of one senior official, ‘They had such an ideological way of expressing everything’.³⁹

A more overtly party political contribution was the culmination of the work of the Education Study Group at the CPS. Published in 1982, *The Right to Learn* consisted of 14 chapters by members of the Group on various aspects of education. Although described by Cox and Marks as ‘a document designed to serve as the basis for discussion on Conservative education policy for the mid-eighties’,⁴⁰ the balance of the book concentrated more on criticism than creativeness, containing little in terms of anything new or distinctive. While the editors acknowledged that there had been no identifiable Conservative Party approach to education in the way that could be said of other areas, such as the

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Wilby interview.

³⁹ Unattributed interview material.

⁴⁰ Cox, C. and Marks, J. (eds.) (1982) *The Right to Learn: Purpose, Professionalism and Accountability in State Education*. London: Centre for Policy Studies, p. 1.

economy or law and order, if anything, the book highlighted the continued dearth of new ideas at the heart of the Conservative thought on education. Its contents relied heavily on contributions from many former Black Paperites such as Professor Anthony Flew, Fred Naylor, Lawrence Norcross and Professor Arthur Pollard. The most interesting consequence of the book was the raised profile it was to give to the editors, and to Caroline Cox, in particular. The following year, she was summoned for an interview with Mrs Thatcher, who informed her that,

I've been reading some of your books on education and I'm preparing a list of names to give Her Majesty the Queen for recommendations for life peerages. May I put your name on that list? I hope you will support us on education. I know you don't always support us on health.⁴¹

Cox presumed the peerage was largely for her contribution to *The Rape of Reason*, the account of the affair at the Polytechnic of North London and which Mrs Thatcher had reportedly read. John Marks, however, believed that 'a more important factor' was *The Right to Learn*, a copy of which Mrs Thatcher had been given three months before awarding Cox her peerage.⁴² Whatever the reason, the episode clearly demonstrated that, although still very much detached from direct involvement, Mrs Thatcher was certainly maintaining an awareness of what was happening in education and of who could be relied upon as 'one of us'. It could also be seen as a mark of gradually-increasing frustration at the apparent lack of progress on the education front in general and with her first Secretary of State for Education in particular, despite the presence of Rhodes Boyson within the Department.

'Marginalised' minister

Without direct Prime Ministerial intervention in education, and failing the appointment of an 'ideologically' committed minister as was generally to be the case during the 1980s, the traditional resort of Prime Ministers was to shadow ideologically-suspect ministers with juniors who were 'one of us'. Examples of

⁴¹ Boyd, *Voice for the Voiceless*, p. 51.

⁴² Ibid., p. 53.

this saw the appointment of Boyson as junior minister under Carlisle, while Angela Rumbold, Michael Fallon and Emily Blatch were junior ministers under Kenneth Baker, John McGregor and John Patten respectively. How effective they were or were meant to be is difficult to judge. Indeed, the first of these appointments, that of Boyson, who was arguably one of the most influential critics outside government, was probably the least effective while at the Department of Education. No less than Sexton, Boyson had a clear, if dogmatic, view of the type of education system he preferred. What he did not have was either the temperament to play the Whitehall game, or, despite expressions of sympathy, little direct support from the Prime Minister, even for securing the key responsibility for schools.⁴³

The appointment of Carlisle's ministerial team in 1979 saw this responsibility given to Lady Young, who was also appointed Minister of State, or official second in the Department. Described as 'determined and persuasive and a personal friend of Mrs Thatcher', Lady Young was reported to have 'pulled rank and won a disaster area – schools', an appointment said to be 'an unexpected tonic for the local education authorities'.⁴⁴ Boyson, on the other hand, was made Parliamentary Under Secretary, with responsibility for higher education. In his memoirs, Boyson wrote how he 'had hoped to be a Minister of State and I was slightly disappointed and asked who the other ministers were...I felt I was being marginalised and that the Department did not want me in schools'.⁴⁵ Boyson laid the blame for his 'marginalisation' at the door of James Hamilton, whom he claims 'got at' Carlisle.⁴⁶ Sexton's opinion was that Boyson was at that time already too well known as a radical on schools, and he was doubly dangerous from the point of view of the Civil Servants, being both 'committed and knowledgeable', having been a headteacher within the state system.⁴⁷ Such judgements are borne out almost verbatim by Hamilton's own recollections, which also showed the depth of Boyson's 'slight disappointment':

⁴³ While it was reported that Mrs Thatcher recognized Boyson's opinions as 'diamond-sharp', it was also felt that she 'may think him somewhat too rough a diamond in style for her taste'. *The Times*, 29 April 1986.

⁴⁴ *Education*, 11 May 1979.

⁴⁵ Boyson, *Speaking My Mind*, p. 146.

⁴⁶ Boyson interview.

⁴⁷ Sexton interview.

I knew Mark Carlisle was going to have a difficult time as he would be up against the one person who knew all about education and the Department. He (Carlisle) was a nice man but he was not an experienced practitioner. With two ministerial posts to fill and Rhodes Boyson by reputation too radical and too knowledgeable about schools, I persuaded Mark Carlisle of the merits of appointing Lady Young as Schools Minister. Boyson threatened to refuse the higher education post and resign, which I was not too worried about. My main worry was what Mrs Thatcher's reaction would be if he did.⁴⁸

Boyson himself later recalled being summoned to the meeting with Carlisle and Hamilton. 'We thought you'd like a change', was how they started the meeting, before offering him the higher education brief. Boyson refused and said he would have to discuss the offer with colleagues, after which he recanted and accepted the post 'only under pressure from my constituency chairman'.⁴⁹ If for nothing else, Boyson's acceptance of his post was of immense symbolic importance, as it was with the other Thatcherites who would later hold junior posts within the Department. Their totemic presence was a symbol of sorts to those outside pushing for reform, even if it was equally an indication of tensions and differing expectations of those involved in reform.

Outside his specific ministerial responsibilities, Boyson's speeches remained clarion calls to the right. In a strange kind of way he would also play a useful role for officials in that he was a political touchstone for many policies, often providing the Party political perspective that would normally have been the role of the special adviser, but which Sexton was often uninterested in taking on. Hamilton described how Boyson 'was very much dominated by parish pump politics and you did have to listen to him very carefully and you ignored him at your peril if he said that the Party will not wear this'.⁵⁰ Yet outside of the publication of exam results, Boyson's personal impact as minister on major areas

⁴⁸ Hamilton interview.

⁴⁹ Boyson, 'New Thoughts on the Educational Voucher'.

⁵⁰ Hamilton interview. Hamilton recalled one instance when, 'In 1980 we proposed to change the distance requirements for claiming travel passes from local authorities. Boyson warned of the danger from Roman Catholic schools who had been given assurances in 1944 that if they built schools outside cities their travel would be subsidised. I ignored his advice and found myself visited by Lord Butler and the Archbishop among others. The Bill went through the Commons but when it went to the Lords it suffered the biggest defeat ever. Lady Young was furious.'

of policy was negligible. Although he spent considerable time during the first two years working on a student loans scheme, his final proposal was shelved by a Cabinet sub-committee for political reasons. The accession of Keith Joseph, who then gave Boyson responsibility for schools, appeared to indicate that education was finally to be the subject of radical change, and certainly from the right of the party, the Keith Joseph-Boyson combination was seen as a 'dream ticket'. The outcome, however, fell far short of expectations. In his memoirs, Boyson described the schools section of the Department as having 'a departmental view on almost all issues that could be changed only with the firm, specific and continued backing of the Secretary of State'.⁵¹ Without, as Boyson pointedly described, this 'firm, specific and continued backing of the Secretary of State' or, indeed, of the Prime Minister, and without the political nous or personal willingness to try and chart an alternative course, Boyson's tenure at the Department would end in disappointment and disillusion.

No, minister

Unlike the *irregular* agenda, which appeared to have only inched forward between 1979 and 1981, the *regular* drift towards tighter control of the curriculum set in train after the Ruskin speech continued undisturbed during the early years of the first Thatcher administration. Starting with *The Curriculum 11-16* (1977), through *A Framework for the School Curriculum* (1980), *A View of the Curriculum* (1980) and *The School Curriculum* (1981), the silhouette of a national curriculum was outlined by both the DES and HMI, although the distinct features contained within their respective outlines differed greatly. The model originally proposed in 1977 was further developed in 1980 by HMI and displayed what has been described as the 'professional common-curriculum approach'.⁵² The construction of a curriculum was to be based around 'areas of experience', such as the aesthetic and creative, the linguistic and the scientific, rather than around discrete subjects. Clyde Chitty described the HMI model as seeking

⁵¹ Boyson, *Speaking My Mind*, p. 160.

⁵² Chitty, C. 'Two Models of a National Curriculum: origins and interpretation', in Lawton, D. and Chitty, C. (1987) *The National Curriculum*, London: Institute of Education, p. 34.

. . .to undermine traditional subject boundaries and uses subjects to achieve higher level aims. It requires teachers who are well motivated, well-trained, and skilled in identifying any specific learning problems for individual pupils. It is wary of any system geared to writing off large sections of the school population as failures.⁵³

Outside the DES, the tone in which this model was discussed, clearly made it the preference of the rest of the 'education establishment'. Although someone like Denis Lawton would assert that there is no 'education establishment' - 'There are too many discordant voices, disagreeing about more than they agreed'⁵⁴ - there were and are certain key issues around which professional support tends to gel. The 'areas of experience' type curriculum was one of them, but its viability would be undermined by, among other factors, HMI's own evidence as regards the ability of teachers to deliver it. The alternative model, that of the DES, which relied on traditional subjects, led to the criticism that it was 'becoming centrist and directive on curriculum issues in a bureaucratic, technicist, non-professional way'.⁵⁵ The first of the DES documents, *A Framework for the School Curriculum* in 1980, provoked the greatest controversy. It specified a limited number of core subjects and the time allocation for each. This DES model was described as the 'bureaucratic core-curriculum approach...concerned with the "efficiency" of the whole system and with the need to obtain precise information to demonstrate that efficiency'.⁵⁶ A truce of sorts with the HMI model was declared with the publication of *The School Curriculum* in 1981. This document talked in terms of both subjects and areas of experience and 'could be seen to incorporate two views of a national curriculum framework without reconciling them'.⁵⁷ There was a definite feeling that the DES was pulling in its horns 'after having got involved in the curriculum only to realise just how complicated it was'.⁵⁸ The *TES*, so often the mouthpiece of the established orthodoxy, described the DES intervention as a teacher might describe a tiresome student:

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Denis Lawton interview, 26 October 2000.

⁵⁵ Lawton, *The Tightening Grip*, p. 8.

⁵⁶ Chitty, 'Two Models' in Lawton and Chitty, *National Curriculum*, p. 35.

⁵⁷ Janet Maw quoted in Chitty, *Towards a New Education System*, p. 118.

The School Curriculum represents the liquidation of commitments to a core curriculum and a defined framework, which ministers entered into without understanding what was involved. It was not a very glorious retreat, but at least it gets this tiresome business out of the DES's hair and leaves it to the professionals.⁵⁹

The same tone infused the pamphlet *No, Minister, A Critique of the D.E.S. Paper 'The School Curriculum'*, penned by 8 academics, 7 of them from the Institute of Education, University of London. The final paper, written by Denis Lawton, then Deputy Director of the Institute and later Director, was titled 'Shall we try again, Minister?' In it, he described *A Framework for the School Curriculum*, with its 'crude quantification' as 'never much of a threat anyway, and only a bit of bureaucratic silliness which would not have been taken seriously and could never have been enforced'.⁶⁰ *The School Curriculum* was then described as 'not only a complacent document, but a backward looking and dangerous document as well'.⁶¹ 'Complacent', 'backward looking' and 'dangerous' were perhaps equally valid descriptions of the reaction to the DES proposals. The intervention of ministers and the DES may have demonstrated ineptness and a lack of perspective, but in the tone of intolerance and superiority with which they were received, one can also sense some of the seeds of Kenneth Baker's own later intolerant rush to get the 1988 Act on the statute books being sown. If the answer is always going to be 'No, Minister', why bother asking the question at all?

A further sting in the tail of *The School Curriculum* was that after two years, LEAs were required to report on any progress made since its publication. Asking for evidence of such actions from the local authorities would prove to be a triumph of hope over experience. In the face of continued intransigence, direct intervention in curriculum policies was sidelined in favour of a more indirect approach. In some respects, this involved no less a degree of intervention but was carried on through the back door of examinations and qualifications, and by no less a personage than the guru of non-interventionism, Sir Keith Joseph.

⁵⁸ Lawton interview.

⁵⁹ *TES*, 27 March 1981.

⁶⁰ Lawton, D. 'Shall We Try Again, Minister?' in White, J. et al. (1981) *No, Minister. A Critique of the D.E.S. Paper 'The School Curriculum'*, London: Institute of Education, p. 52.

Conclusion

After his departure, it was to be Keith Joseph rather than Mark Carlisle for whom Rhodes Boyson reserved the greatest opprobrium. By contrast, Carlisle's departure was a cause of some regret by all those working and scheming during his time at the DES. Boyson wrote that he worked with Carlisle 'amicably' for two years and 'was sorry to see (him) go in the reshuffle'.⁶² Sexton felt that Carlisle was 'underrated'.⁶³ His departure was also regretted by his Civil Servants. 'He was a decent polite man', according to one, 'and he listened to what you told him – you can't say much more of any minister than that. And in government terms he delivered a 9 per cent cut. What did he do wrong?'⁶⁴ Carlisle's lack of leadership of the Department was being damned with faint praise. One even writes of Carlisle's time through the activities of others. While everyone could feel that they were able to manoeuvre for their own agendas, without too much of a tight rein from the top, the problem was that there was neither a tight rein nor a strong lead. In the face of LEA inertia and political indifference, the stream of curriculum-related documents issued in the wake of Ruskin by the DES and HMI would begin to dry up, with unresolved differences between both bodies on such questions as the nature of any national or core curriculum. Although champions of radical reform, such as Stuart Sexton and Rhodes Boyson, also now found themselves no longer in the wilderness, but actually making their case within the DES, their impact was also greatly reduced by a lack of political support.

Despite the heat generated by some of the minor developments, the period 1979 to 1981 was characterised by caution and frustration for the Conservative reformers. By 1981, at best, a number of markers for the future had been laid down. In particular, the ending of the requirement for local authorities to go comprehensive, changes to school governing bodies, the introduction of the Assisted Places Scheme and the requirement for schools to publish examination results. Although modest in themselves, they did indicate a very different set of priorities and intimated a changing climate in education policy. While Boyson

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 55.

⁶² Boyson, *Speaking My Mind*, p. 159.

⁶³ Sexton interview.

⁶⁴ *Education*, 18 September 1981.

and Sexton operated from within the DES, other *irregulars* such as the CPS Education Study Group had also begun to publish their views on education. Even, if for the moment, these and other contributions remained inchoate and isolated, they were of sufficient import to bring them to the attention of Mrs Thatcher, whose priorities had not yet begun to encompass direct intervention into the area of education reform. ‘There were more important things on Thatcher’s mind in the early part of her period of office’, recalled Sexton, ‘and she seemed to be satisfied with what we were doing on education which was non-sensational but necessary’.⁶⁵ This did not prevent her from, at the very least, making a strong political statement about her preferences in this policy area, with the appointment of Carlisle’s replacement, Sir Keith Joseph.

⁶⁵ Sexton interviewed in Davies-Griffith, ‘The development of education policy’, p. 154.

CHAPTER 4

September 1981 – May 1986: *Different Drummers*

Introduction

In May 1981, Sir Keith Joseph was appointed as Secretary of State for Education. His appointment could not have been seen as anything other than a boost to the *irregular* agenda in education. Yet any initial optimism was soon dispelled. While Keith Joseph no doubt brought his own unique spin to policies, tinted by a right-wing perspective, he failed utterly to provide the overarching leadership that both his political and departmental roles required. Keith Joseph's tenure at the helm of education policy only served to highlight the Conservatives as a confused party with much to be confused about. In political terms, as far as his right-wing colleagues and the bulk of the *irregulars* were concerned, the dilemma was that Keith Joseph was powerful enough, certainly given his 'special relationship' with Mrs Thatcher, to resist their demands for reform. Not only that, but he also started to pursue a *regular* or establishment agenda that they abhorred and which, by rights, he should have also, as the original 'one of us'.¹

It remains an intriguing question as to why Keith Joseph did not fulfil the expectations of his colleagues on the right. What, in particular, was behind his dismissal of the long-cherished education voucher, something that he himself was moved to describe as 'a noble concept'? Did this signal the continued strength and influence of the *regulars*? Equally intriguing is what was the reaction of Keith Joseph's colleagues? We know that, almost immediately after his resignation in 1986, a host of policy suggestions erupted into public view. How and where had these been gestating in the interim? Were there any implications arising out of this process for the future development of policy?

¹ Five years after his appointment, Salter and Tapper suggested that 'While the Right has succeeded in reversing the ratchet in the areas of public values and party policy, its impact on the influence of the state in education has been, ironically, to help extend that influence even further'. Quoted in Davies-Griffith, 'The development of education policy', p.135.

'One of Us?'

In attempting to balance the conflicting demands of his own personal beliefs, those emanating from various quarters within and around the Conservative Party, and his duty as Secretary of State for Education, Joseph would prove to be, 'A reluctant dragon...who is constantly being forced back, against his will, to his responsibilities under the Education Acts'.² Joseph's dilemma was clear for all to see in his speech to the Conservative Party conference in 1981. 'So here we are', he told his audience, 'with over 85% of secondary pupils in comprehensive schools. . .For the sake of all the children in all those schools, or are to go into them, we need to make the best of them enthusiastically'.³ For his colleagues, the disappointment that would flow from this judgement was all the more acute given that, as a free marketeer and one in favour of minimal government, much was expected from the right following his appointment.⁴ The omens had appeared favourable. It was an appointment he had himself wanted,⁵ and one of his first acts in office was to swap ministerial posts within his team, at last giving the pro-voucher Boyson the Schools portfolio, and doing so without taking any advice from his officials.⁶ For many on the right, that was as good as it got over the next four-and-a-half years.

The first problem was soon encountered. Despite his intellectual radicalism, Joseph had a reputation for being a 'soft touch' for his officials. Alfred Sherman at the CPS had been aware of this from Joseph's time as

² *TES*, 24 June 1983.

³ Quoted in Halcrow, M. (1989) *Keith Joseph. A Single Mind*. London: Macmillan, p. 170.

⁴ During an interview over lunch with an education journalist, Keith Joseph laid out his reductionist views on the efficiency of the free market. 'Look around you,' he said, 'This is a good restaurant, and it's full – because it's giving people what they want. If it were a bad restaurant, it would go out of business'. *TES*, 14 September 2001.

⁵ 'When I knew that Mark Carlisle would be going', he later recalled, 'I went to Mrs Thatcher to ask if I could have the job. And after her experiences at the DES in the early 1970s, I think she was surprised that anyone should want to go there'. Ribbins and Sherratt, *Radical Education Policies*, p. 80.

⁶ Hamilton interview.

Minister under Heath. Sherman's conclusion was that Joseph had 'simply been eaten alive by his Civil Servants'.⁷ Stuart Sexton was more caustic:

Keith Joseph was a ditherer. He loved the debate but not the decision. He thought someone like Nick Stuart was a good fellow because he could argue well, a fellow "fellow" as it were. He always accepted officials as experts and clearly felt that anybody at Deputy Secretary level was bound to be an "honest chap".⁸

Sexton had reason to be sharp. At the same time as Boyson was given the Schools portfolio, Joseph, on the advice of his officials, then proceeded to jettison Sexton as his special adviser. Although James Hamilton felt that the main reason Sexton was originally let go was because 'Keith Joseph had no regard for Sexton's intellectual abilities',⁹ there was little doubt that officials would have been glad to see the back of the freewheeling Sexton. 'It was Rhodes Boyson who saved the day', said Hamilton of Sexton's return, 'but I had made clear my concern that he (Sexton) played by the rules'.¹⁰ It was a concern that the punctilious Keith Joseph was happy to reinforce. According to Robert Balchin, 'When Sexton was reinstated Keith Joseph used to refer to him as "my right-wing conscience" yet he was always quick to remind him that "You were not elected"'.¹¹ Sexton himself acknowledged the change in climate:

The strength of the adviser is dependent on the support he gets from his Minister. Mark Carlisle always backed me and in some respects I had more clout during his time. Keith Joseph was more discriminating, more independent, and more indecisive.¹²

⁷ Cockett, *Thinking the Unthinkable*, p. 275. Joseph's performance at the Department of Industry since 1979 had done little to allay such fears. One account, written in 1980, described how, within a month of his appointment, 'his senior Civil Servants were confident that they had got the guru under control'. Maurice Stephenson quoted in Halcrow, *Keith Joseph*, p. 135.

⁸ Sexton interview.

⁹ Hamilton interview.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Robert Balchin interview, 28 July 1998.

¹² Sexton interview.

But if the Secretary of State's 'discrimination' and 'independence' in seeking out advice were sources of frustration for those with whom he worked, the major reason for discord was the charge of Keith Joseph's 'indecisiveness'. Nowhere was this more apparent to his colleagues than during the Departmental debate regarding vouchers.

Official opposition?

For many on the right, the failure to introduce an educational voucher during the early 1980s, alongside the difficulties encountered by many subsequent reforms, can be laid at the door of officials within the DES. If, in the early 1980s, still mining the seam opened by Ruskin, greater control was thought to be the long-term aim for the Department, it was not unreasonable to assume that few officials could be expected to have much sympathy for the introduction of a voucher system. Some key officials also appeared to have displayed a vigour for 'snag hunting' over and above the norm.¹³ One of those identified was Walter Ulrich, Deputy Secretary at the DES in charge of the Schools Branch, and consequently one of the *betes noires* in all subsequent accounts.¹⁴ Ulrich had been in the Civil Service since 1951, before joining the Cabinet Office in 1975, from where he was brought into the DES as Deputy Secretary by James Hamilton, his former boss in the Cabinet Office. According to Hamilton, 'I had known Walter for many years. He was extremely able, someone fresh from the outside whom I knew who would prick the system, would give it a dig. And that's just what he did'.¹⁵ Brought in deliberately to help push the Ruskin - *Yellow Book* agenda both within and without the DES, and not a 'lifer' in the tradition of many officials in the Department, 'Ulrich and other new people were initially only accepted with a

¹³ Hugh Dalton, the Labour politician, reportedly described top Civil Servants as 'congenital snag hunters'. Hennessey, *Whitehall*, p. 124.

¹⁴ On the relationship between ministers, advisers and Civil Servants in the period between 1982 and 1983, both William Waldergrave and William Shelton, who were junior ministers at the time, believed that 'the most important figure on schools (was) Walter Ulrich', Knight, *Making of Tory Education Policy*, p. 158.

¹⁵ Hamilton interview.

great deal of reluctance'.¹⁶ This reluctance was soon overcome, as one of his colleagues described how Ulrich very quickly 'went totally native and became totally obsessed with education policy', remaining in the Department until his retirement in 1988.¹⁷

Affection is not one of the emotions with which Ulrich is remembered for his contribution to education policy. Mark Carlisle, displaying a lawyer's careful choice of words told one interviewer 'There was that strange, perhaps "strange" is the wrong word, bright man, Walter Ulrich. . .'.¹⁸ David Hancock, Ulrich's boss from 1983 also found it awkward to describe him: 'Walter was a fascinating character. He was extremely meticulous, professionally very correct, and argued with great vigour. Bob Dunn thought he was a communist. I admired him a great deal'.¹⁹ Others were less circumspect in their judgement. According to John Clare, Ulrich was highly combative, almost 'a Stalinist who tolerated no dissent. He was ideologically very strong and it was very hard to discern any notion of Civil Service impartiality, immersed as he was in the education ideology from the progressive 1970s'.²⁰ Tony Kerpel, who was Kenneth Baker's special adviser, recalled that,

Ulrich was exceptional and I don't mean that in a complimentary sense. He was exceptional in the way he saw himself. I never saw another Deputy Secretary act as he did and a more assertive Permanent Secretary would have slapped him down for some of the things he said and did. I was astonished at what he got away with.²¹

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Saville interview.

¹⁸ Ribbins and Sherratt, *Radical Educational Policies*, p. 66.

¹⁹ David Hancock interview, 4 June 1998. Ulrich did not always appear to be entirely 'professionally very correct'. In his memoirs, Kenneth Baker described Hancock as 'the nominal Head of the Department but schools policy remained the fiefdom of those officials brought up and bred in the DES tradition'. Ulrich, described as 'no particular fan of government policies', sat directly opposite Baker at meetings while Hancock was 'relegated to sitting at the end of the table'. Baker, *Turbulent Years*, pp. 166-167.

²⁰ Clare interview.

²¹ Tony Kerpel interview, 23 November 1998.

Ulrich would be joined at the DES in 1980 by Nick Stuart, then an Under Secretary, who perhaps would arguably achieve greater 'notoriety' than Ulrich as an even sharper critic of some government policies.²² Stuart's curriculum vitae was probably sufficient to warrant the suspicion of many on the right. He had joined the DES as Assistant Principal when it was established in 1964 and would remain on and off at the Department, aside from brief spells outside. These included acting as Private Secretary to Harold Wilson between 1973 and 1976, and adviser to Roy Jenkins as President of the EEC between 1978 and 1980. Stuart worked closely with Ulrich, so much so that he was referred to as 'Ulrichsson' by some in the Department and would be promoted to Deputy Secretary on the latter's retirement.²³ He is remembered as being even more trenchant and combative than his predecessor. According to one commentator,

At least you knew where you stood with Ulrich and ministers were quite quickly able to locate who Ulrich was and where he was coming from. Nick Stuart was more insidious, more self-consciously devious and manipulative.²⁴

Another commentator felt that 'Nick Stuart had an intellectual contempt that he found difficult to disguise. He did not suffer fools gladly and his whole manner was very patrician'.²⁵ Surprisingly, or perhaps unsurprisingly, Stuart found an admirer, or at least a kindred spirit, in one junior minister, the equally combative Michael Fallon. According to Fallon, 'Nick Stuart was smarter than Ulrich. He

²² One of his colleagues thought that, 'Whatever his personal feelings, Nick would not oppose something so long as all the relevant people wanted it'. Unattributed interview material. Robert Balchin, a government adviser who would play a significant role in Grant Maintained Schools policy, also revealed how Stuart was apparently 'the convenor of a hitherto unknown group of like-minded educationists that met three times a year at All Soul's College, Oxford'. Balchin was invited to one of their meetings: 'They didn't approve of the current government's reforms in education at all. I asked them if they ever listened to views which were unwelcome to them, and I got the distinct impression that the answer was "no". I haven't been asked back'. Phillips, M. (1996) *All Must Have Prizes*. London: Little Brown and Company, p. 161.

²³ Fallon interview.

²⁴ Unattributed interview material. Tony Kerpel described Stuart as someone who 'had a particular political world view and was a very clever office politician. He was someone who liked to eat regularly in the canteen and liked to have a coterie of junior officials around him'. Kerpel interview.

²⁵ Wilby interview.

would, if pushed, make no secret that your idea was a right-wing crackpot scheme, but would then show you how to implement it. But then slowly the problems would become apparent. He was immensely impressive'.²⁶ While acknowledging that both Ulrich and Stuart 'were not always easy people to overturn from their arguments', James Hamilton also believed that they 'were extremely shrewd and intelligent people, tough operators who have been unfairly demonised'.²⁷ Whatever the particular merits of the other opinions expressed above, and bearing in mind that some of those interviewed had their own axes to grind, the team of Ulrich and Stuart was clearly an extremely formidable one. Any set of ministers would have difficulty getting anything controversial past them, even assuming that the ministerial team was united, was led with determination, and had a fair political wind in their sails, all of which were lacking during Keith Joseph's tenure as Education Secretary.

A battle lost

From the wilder shores of IEA pamphlets during the 1960s and 1970s, to the marginally more respectable berth of the Black Papers, between 1981 and 1983, education vouchers suddenly found themselves catapulted to near centre stage within the DES. Despite their apparent failure, the actual time and energy given to the debates within the DES marked another qualitatively important, if as yet unavailing shift, in the parameters of the debate on education policy. In the short term, however, increased visibility for vouchers did not however mean increased viability. At the Conservative Party Conference soon after his appointment, Keith Joseph flattered to deceive with his comments. 'I have been intellectually attracted to the idea of seeing whether a voucher might be a way of increasing parental choice even further', he told the delegates. He then immediately followed this by warning of the 'very great difficulties in making the voucher deliver, in a way that would commend itself to us, more choice than the 1980 Act will deliver'.²⁸ Immediately suspecting Civil Service obstructionism, two

²⁶ Fallon interview.

²⁷ Hamilton interview.

²⁸ Halcrow, *Keith Joseph*, p. 170.

pressure groups, the National Council for Educational Standards (NCES) and the Friends of the Education Voucher in Representative Regions (FEVER) wrote to him asking for details of the problems that needed to be resolved. Sir Keith replied with a paper prepared by his Civil Servants that detailed some 15 problems.²⁹ Soon after, a round of internal discussions began within the Department on the merits of a voucher system, with the Civil Servants one side, Joseph's advisers and junior ministers on the other, and Joseph himself, to the fury of his political colleagues, refusing to intervene on their behalf.

Boyson's verdict on this 'stately quadrille'³⁰ was that 'Keith Joseph was a nice man but he treated vouchers as he did everything else, an intellectual exercise. It got so bad and his lack of commitment (to vouchers) was so clear and so obvious that I no longer went to those meetings'.³¹ While Boyson was away, apparently, on his own admission, reading detective novels,³² among the pro-voucher group, Sexton was joined from June 1983 by another adviser, Oliver Letwin. Letwin, ex-Eton and Cambridge, was the son of family friends of Keith Joseph. As Keith Joseph, according to James Hamilton, 'increasingly came to rely on Letwin's advice',³³ his appointment and subsequent interventions were deeply resented by officials within the Department who referred to him as the 'Etonian prat'.³⁴ Letwin described the collection of *irregulars* who were pushing at this time for a voucher scheme as 'a froth of outsiders along with a cabal of insiders who sensed that something might actually happen'.³⁵ If so, they had reckoned without the combination of the Secretary of State and his officials. Robert Dunn, who was Boyson's friend and replacement at the DES after the 1983 election, described Keith Joseph's 'Olympian detachment' with a sense of frustration that remained palpable after a decade. Dunn likened the opposing

²⁹ DES (1981) *Education Vouchers: A DES Paper*. London: HMSO.

³⁰ Halcrow, *Keith Joseph*, p. 173.

³¹ Boyson interview.

³² Boyson, 'New thoughts on the educational voucher'.

³³ Hamilton interview.

³⁴ Unattributed interview material. Although it was reported at the time of his appointment that he 'had a special interest in vouchers', (*TES*, 1 October 1983) Letwin himself admits that he had 'no previous knowledge or interest in vouchers'. Oliver Letwin interview, 4 October 1994. Norman Tebbit has recently described Letwin, currently Shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer, as 'Keith Joseph incarnate'. <http://news.independent.co.uk/people/profiles/story>.

³⁵ Letwin interview.

sides at the meetings to ‘Holmes and Moriarty struggling over the Reichenbach Falls while Keith Joseph stood idly by on the hillside’.³⁶

Despite his detachment, there is little doubt that Keith Joseph did spend enormous amounts of time and energy looking at the feasibility of vouchers. This was much to the annoyance of his Permanent Secretary at the time who felt that ‘The best people in the Department spent ages looking at vouchers when they should have been getting on with real reforms’.³⁷ Despite his public pronouncements that appeared to show continued backing to the idea of a voucher,³⁸ in June 1983 Keith Joseph was to announce that ‘the voucher, at least in the foreseeable future, is dead’ and continued to assert thereafter that there were too many ‘great practical difficulties’ which were ‘too great to justify further consideration of a voucher system’. To cries of ‘shame’ at the Party conference later that year, he told delegates that ‘After 18 months of diligent search I had to concede I did not see it possible to introduce the noble concept of the voucher’.³⁹

The reasons as to why Keith Joseph felt obliged not to pursue further the ‘noble concept’ have subsequently been the cause for much speculation. One suggestion was that vouchers had effectively been killed by the Chancellor, Geoffrey Howe, who ruled them out purely for reasons of cost. Keith Joseph would have none of it. ‘Finances didn’t enter into it’, he later said,

I was a frustrated enthusiast because I was forced to accept that, largely for political reasons, it wouldn’t be practicable. . . .you would have very controversial legislation, which would take two or three years to carry through, with my party split, and the other parties unanimously hostile, on wrong grounds. And all the producer forces hostile.⁴⁰

³⁶ Dunn interview.

³⁷ Hamilton interview. John Barnes recalled an interesting vignette of Joseph’s odyssey. ‘Keith Joseph turned up at the LSE to see me’, said Barnes, ‘He slouched down in to a chair and simply said, “I’ve come to talk about vouchers”. I then went to see an extremely sceptical Nick Stuart who said the usual alarmist things’. Barnes interview.

³⁸ At the 1982 Party conference he reiterated his support. ‘I believe’, he told the conference, with Mrs Thatcher ‘listening attentively at his side’, that ‘if vouchers were combined with open enrolment, some of the least good state schools would disappear and increasing competition might galvanise the less good state schools to achieve better results’. *Education*, 8 October 1982.

³⁹ *Education*, 21 November 1983.

⁴⁰ Sherratt and Ribbins, *Radical Education Policies*, pp. 82-83.

At least one observer concurred that Keith Joseph had been disconcerted by the reaction the topic of vouchers could engender. ‘Keith Joseph was surprised at the depth of intellectual resistance there was to vouchers’, recalled Peter Wilby, ‘and was daunted to find such a solid phalanx of opinion ranging against him’.⁴¹ The reaction from the neo-liberals was more straightforward. Arthur Seldon, long-time proponent of such a scheme, claimed that the reason was based not on ‘administrative impracticality, but official feet-dragging’.⁴²

That Sir Keith was influenced greatly by the arguments of his Civil Servants over the practical difficulties involved with a voucher scheme is not in question. Whether this counts as obstructionism, or evidence of being ‘winged’ by officials is more contentious. Joseph himself felt that ‘Civil Servants were sceptical about the panacea, but were totally honourable in examining the mechanics’.⁴³ The most telling verdict on the ‘mechanics’ of the proposal itself comes from its strongest advocates within the *irregular* ‘inner cabal’, Letwin and Sexton. According to the former:

Although I had been hired by Keith Joseph to consider vouchers I always felt that he never really intended to implement a scheme. He was always lukewarm and officials sensed this very early on and thus fought and refought their own ground in this knowledge. They (Civil Servants) were not wild ideologues just simply fighting for the status quo in the face of the genuine and considerable administrative difficulty in implementing any scheme. If we had come up with a workable scheme the officials would have implemented it.⁴⁴

Sexton, while never reluctant to denigrate the stance of officials, admitted that ‘To some extent the Civil Servants were right. The state system was too

⁴¹ Wilby interview.

⁴² Seldon, A. (1986) *The Riddle of the Voucher*. London: Institute of Economic Affairs, p. 97.

⁴³ *Contemporary Record*, Vol. 1, No. 1, Spring 1987, p. 31.

⁴⁴ Letwin interview.

unorganised to introduce such a scheme'.⁴⁵ The intransigence of some of the voucher's keenest supporters and their unwillingness to accept anything less than a 'pure' voucher system, was also a significant factor in strengthening the official argument regarding the 'genuine and considerable administrative difficulties' involved. According to Sexton, 'A step by step approach was available in 1981 but we were forced to jump the gun. We went for the whole hog because of a request by Keith Joseph who was under pressure from certain advocates of the voucher such as Marjorie Seldon who wondered why it couldn't be done tomorrow'.⁴⁶ Oliver Letwin also described the 'war-horse mentality' among those who wanted a voucher system 'exactly as they had advocated it for 20 years but were unwilling to work out the details. They were likely to have overestimated the pressure behind it as no one had persuaded Mrs Thatcher that the plan or indeed any plan would work'.⁴⁷ The most succinct verdict on such an approach was provided by two American academics quoted, ironically, in Arthur Seldon's *Riddle of the Voucher*. 'Insiders and intellectuals', they wrote, 'saw vouchers as a solution to vague and abstract problems, such as monopoly power in education – not as the solution to the day-to-day problems of running a school system'.⁴⁸

It is likely that Keith Joseph was also instrumental in apparently convincing Mrs Thatcher, if only briefly, of the same conclusion. 'We simply cannot operate it', she said, 'the administrative consequences would be colossal'.⁴⁹ Yet the decision not to go for a voucher scheme in 1983 only marked the end of one particular strategy. The 'full frontal assault' on the educational establishment had failed. Despite the apparently formidable array of opposition, the *irregulars* had only lost a battle rather than the war. Letwin, Sexton, and others had already begun to develop new strategies, often without the support and often without the knowledge of the Secretary of State, and which would be more

⁴⁵ Sexton interview.

⁴⁶ Ibid. Marjorie Seldon was the wife of Arthur Seldon.

⁴⁷ Letwin interview. Ferdinand Mount, then Head of the Policy Unit, described how 'Enthusiasts for reform at the IEA and the CPS were prodigal with committees and pamphlets, but were much less helpful when it came to providing practical options for action. This made it difficult for the Policy Unit's ideas to overcome the objections put forward by senior officials at the Department, notably W O Ulrich'. Quoted in Davies-Griffith, 'The development of education policy', p. 171.

⁴⁸ Seldon, *Riddle of the Voucher*, p. 2, f/n. The comments were made in relation to why vouchers had failed in some areas in the United States.

⁴⁹ *TES*, 24 June 1983.

subtle and pragmatic than prior to 1983. In 1984 Keith Joseph's continued insistence that 'the idea of the vouchers is no longer on the agenda' only demonstrated how increasingly out of step he was with his colleagues. The idea of a 'pure' voucher may have been officially dropped, but as an ideal it did not disappear. The *irregulars* had decided, as in Brecht's aphorism, that where there are obstacles, the shortest distance between two points is not necessarily a straight line.

Different drummers

Despite finally being given his ideal brief in 1981, the following two years were extremely frustrating for Rhodes Boyson, as he saw his cherished voucher scheme first stalled and then dismissed. After the 1983 election victory, he was moved to the Department for Health and Social Security. Despite apparent failure in government, Boyson had acted as a 'booster rocket' for the New Right agenda. This was then taken up by his successor as Schools Minister, Robert Dunn. A close friend of Boyson and according to his own description, a Conservative 'firmly in the Boysonian tradition',⁵⁰ Dunn's definition of those who opposed education reform was that of a 'café society', consisting of, 'a ragtag of left wing trade unions, left wing LEAs, do-gooders, people who eat brown bread, jaded academics and those who talk rather than act'.⁵¹ Dunn would remain in the Department from 1983 until 1987. During this time he would often as not be voicing the opinions of others, such as Sexton and Boyson, but also representing his own particular brand of working class Toryism.⁵² Like his friend and mentor, Dunn quickly became frustrated at the DES, complaining of 'how little he could do. Indeed many a scheme had run through his head only to be stamped on by a

⁵⁰ Dunn interview

⁵¹ *Education*, 23 December 1988

⁵² At the time of his appointment, Dunn felt that 'Any achievements from 1979 to 1983 were minimal. There was the Assisted Places Scheme and Open Enrolment, but the main gain was finally stopping the comprehensive juggernaut. There had been a failure to inflict our philosophy on the system and you could say that from 1980 we were treading water. Keith Joseph was bruised and no longer had the heart for a fight. He never knew just how mediocre the state system was and was shocked, latching onto the bottom 40%, steered away from other policies by his Civil Servants'. Dunn interview.

civil servant with a brisk “No, Minister””.⁵³ Dunn’s resentment of the influence of the Civil Servants was often matched by the opinion of officials regarding his ministerial abilities. According to one official, ‘Dunn was non-existent, a spot on the wallpaper. It was an embarrassment to wheel him out. He couldn’t master a brief or read a speech’.⁵⁴ Stuart Sexton recalled that ‘Walter Ulrich really got under Bob’s skin, indirectly reminding him that he was the bacon buyer from Sainsbury’s, the secondary modern boy’.⁵⁵ Dunn’s straight-from-the-hip, ‘Boysonian’ approach was also reported ‘to offend Keith Joseph’s own intellectual and philosophical outlook’ and within a year there were reports that Dunn’s ministerial career was about to be curtailed.⁵⁶ After 1983, Dunn would be aligned with Sexton, ostensibly in opposition to Sir Keith, on many issues.

While Sir Keith was publicly pledged to make the comprehensive system work, his new junior minister clearly had other ideas. In October 1983 it was reported that the reintroduction of schools directly funded by the government was back on the agenda as the latest idea for extending parental choice. The idea, described only as ‘a hypothetical sketch’, was set out in a paper by Stuart Sexton ‘in consultation with Dunn and Oliver Letwin’.⁵⁷ By this time, Letwin had transferred to the Prime Minister’s Policy Unit to become her personal adviser on education, and would be an important avenue of communication and promoter of ideas for education reform directly to Mrs Thatcher.⁵⁸ After the 1983 election, as this course of policy formulation began, parallel and different to that on which Keith Joseph was had embarked, a number of other *irregular* actors began to make their presence felt on the course of education policy. One of these was the strongly neo-liberal Adam Smith Institute. Founded in 1977 by three graduates of St. Andrews University – Madsen Pirie, Eamonn Butler and Stuart Butler - it has

⁵³ Speech to annual conference of the Professional Association of Teachers. *Education*, 5 August 1983.

⁵⁴ Saville interview.

⁵⁵ Sexton interview.

⁵⁶ *Education*, 10 August 1984.

⁵⁷ *TES*, 14 October 1983.

⁵⁸ Letwin described the aftermath of the 1983 election as one of ‘euphoria and shock. . . we won the election but had lost the policy. Post-1983 the term “voucher” had become a totem and the word could not be resuscitated. The problem was how to rescue the idea from the flames’. Letwin interview.

been described as the ‘youngest, most aggressively ideological and self-confessed *enfant terrible* of the British think tanks’.⁵⁹ For Pirie,

The IEA was the nearest in conception to us but they had a different job that was to educate the next generation in sound economics. We went straight at policy but each policy had to be below the barricade threshold.
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‘Below the barricade threshold’ was particularly apposite in Britain as the Thatcher government was ‘concerned to have a battery of policy techniques. . . which showed acute sensitivity to that which is politically acceptable’.⁶¹ The ‘stepping stones’ policy towards trade union reform, which originated at the CPS, was a text book example of tackling large political problems through pragmatic, incremental steps. Education policy appeared to offer another similar arena and one in which the ASI could operate. The ASI proposals surfaced in the *Omega Report*, published in 1984.⁶² ‘The problems which beset state education’, said the *Report*, ‘share a common origin with those that incapacitate the other nationalized service industries: the phenomenon of producer capture’.⁶³ The *Report*’s proposals were aimed at breaking this ‘producer capture’ of teachers and the local education authorities and included complete ‘open entry’ to schools within the state sector, giving over the power to run schools to the governing body, and per capita funding or formula funding for schools. According to Pirie, ‘The voucher never really stood a chance. Bureaucrats will always kill it off as the opportunities for alarmism are immense. What we came up with was the

⁵⁹ Hames and Feasy, ‘Anglo-American Think tanks’, p. 233.

⁶⁰ Pirie interview.

⁶¹ Pirie, M. (1988) *Micropolitics: The Creation of Successful Policy*. Aldershot: Wildwood House, p. 51.

⁶² The Report was modelled on *Mandate for Leadership* published by the Heritage Foundation in the United States in 1980. *Mandate* was the distillation of the work of 250 conservative academics, writers and activists, and intended to show the way forward for the newly appointed republican president, Ronald Reagan. The *Omega Report* also covered a range of policy areas, with the stated intention ‘to research new ideas, to develop new policy initiatives, to analyse the obstacles to change and to bring forward into public debate new options which could overcome the conventional difficulties’. Although nearly 100 individuals are acknowledged for their assistance, according to Pirie, the reports were written by ‘myself, Eamonn Butler and Peter Young’. Pirie interview.

tripod or virtual voucher – free choice of schools, school autonomy though control of the budget and per capita funding, these were the bones of the 1988 Education Act. Of course there were bitter attacks from the Seldons for having sold the pass. Our proposals were seen the highest form of treachery’.⁶⁴

The ASI also had strong connections with the No Turning Back Group of MPs formed in 1983. According to Michael Fallon, later a junior minister at Education,

At that time Mrs Thatcher was beginning to wrestle with social reform. With Keith Joseph at Education there had been five years of intellectual agonising and in 1985 she (Mrs Thatcher) was increasingly aware that nothing substantial had been achieved in 6 years. Only at the margins. The lack of depth in education policy derived partly from Mrs Thatcher’s own burning during ’70 to ’74. There was almost a sense of futility, of giving it a go but not expecting it to succeed.⁶⁵

Seen by Bob Dunn as ‘Mrs Thatcher’s nursery for the future’,⁶⁶ this group of strongly ambitious and strongly Thatcherite MPs produced their first pamphlet in 1985. Simply entitled, *No Turning Back*, its sole argument was for the ending of the state monopolies in public services.⁶⁷ Although it did not focus specifically on education, Mrs Thatcher was interested enough in their ideas to have a meeting with the group in November 1985 and ask them to work out their proposals for education in more detail.⁶⁸

Details and practicalities were not something that appealed to another think tank that appeared in the early 1980s, the Social Affairs Unit (SAU).

⁶³ ASI (1984) *Omega Report: Education Policy*. London: Adam Smith Institute, pp. 1-2.

⁶⁴ Pirie interview.

⁶⁵ Fallon interview.

⁶⁶ Dunn interview.

⁶⁷ According to Michael Gove, the biographer one of the leading members of the Group, Michael Portillo, ‘*No Turning Back* was not the work of any one MP. All members had to submit a sheaf of papers to Forsyth who was asked to select and edit. He handed the contributions over to Pirie who wove the mass of radical ideas into a simple and easily recognisable standard for the group to raise’. Gove, M. (1995) *Michael Portillo, The Future of the Right*. London: Fourth Estate, pp. 137-8.

⁶⁸ *TES*, 25 July 1986.

Founded by Digby Anderson, 'think tank' is probably a slight misnomer for the SAU in comparison to other similarly bounded organisations, in that it tends to be long on analysis, eschewing prescriptions in favour of perceptions.⁶⁹ Just as Anderson had contributed to the CPS *Right to Learn*, the second SAU publication, *The Pied Pipers of Education*, contained chapters from Anthony Flew, John Marks and Caroline Cox. Although these publications contributed in general directional terms to the education debate in the early 1980s, arguably the more influential ones were the later but more focussed *The Wayward Curriculum* and *Who Teaches the Teachers?* Like other *irregulars*, Anderson was more than slightly bemused with Keith Joseph and his approach at the DES. Not surprisingly, given the tenor of the SAU writings in this period, Anderson was asked to see Keith Joseph at the Department. 'I and one or two others', recalled Anderson, 'went along to the Department and met with Keith Joseph, and about 18 Civil Servants'.⁷⁰ Joseph's cocooning by his officials and his decision to work for the most part with the grain of the *official* agenda appeared almost complete in the last two years of his time at the DES. In a 1987 interview, Joseph was asked, rather gingerly, whether he kept a broad perspective of his role, or was he kept 'very departmentally engrossed at the DES?' 'I think all my Cabinet service including the DES was engrossing', Joseph replied, 'to the extent that I don't think I left enough energy for the bigger issues'.⁷¹

The stirrings of a coup

The extent to which Sir Keith had become 'engrossed' with the *official* agenda within his department, and had diverged from many of his colleagues, and the Prime Minister, can be seen in the document *Better Schools*, published in 1985. Achievements since 1945 were praised, with no attacks on comprehensives, and if there were failings, they were nothing that better management, training, and

⁶⁹ Anderson, a former sociology lecturer from Nottingham University, described the models for the Unit as 'the IEA and the Fabians. We don't get as near to policy nuts and bolts as the Adam Smith Institute might'. Digby Anderson interview, 29 July 1998.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ *Contemporary Record*, Vol. 1, No. 1, Spring 1987, p. 30.

teacher appraisal could not put right.⁷² After a brief, but deafening, silence from Number Ten, Mrs Thatcher then proceeded to run up her colours in no uncertain terms. Echoing Sexton's earlier 'hypothetical sketch', in a television interview in July 1985, she let it be known that she 'would like to bring back what are called direct grant schools. 'We are', she said, 'looking at that'. She also gave the voucher a public kiss of life, saying that she was 'very disappointed that we were not able to do the voucher scheme and I sometimes think that I must have another go'.⁷³ Later briefings suggested that consideration was also being given to what were described as 'independently owned and run primary schools which would be of high quality and whose aim would be to stimulate schools in surrounding areas to raise standards'.⁷⁴ There was no attempt to refute the ideas in *Better Schools*. They were just simply ignored as Mrs Thatcher had more likely identified a more attractive agenda from other sources.

While many of these would not appear until the following year, Dunn continued to provide a good public barometer of *irregular* thinking on education policy. Dunn believed that, after 1983, 'the flavour of the voucher, certainly with the public, had gone', and the 'new mode or strategy was to devise an alternative model, one with the same principle, where the money would follow the child'.⁷⁵ Unlike his mentor, Boyson, who 'stopped going to the meetings', Dunn, who would make no bones about not being an original thinker, decided to start having a few of his own in the trawl for ideas. He set up his own mini 'think tank' within the Department, which met regularly from 1983 to 1985. It consisted of Dunn,

⁷² The style of *Better Schools* was similar to that of a paper Keith Joseph had presented to the National Economic Development Council in 1983 on the theme of Education and Industry. 'The paper', wrote Kenneth Franklin, 'reflect(ed) many of the characteristics of papers emanating from the DES at this time and over the previous ten years. It offered no clear vision of a way forward. It gives the impression of a Department of State so immersed in the complexities of a long established system that it had neither the will nor energy to envisage how it might be changed. Len Murray summed up the paper neatly in the ensuing discussion when he said "he rated it more highly for its history than for its prescription"'. Franklin, 'The MSC, the DES and the origins of the TVEI', p. 227.

⁷³ *TES*, 19 July 1985.

⁷⁴ *The Times*, 18 July 1985.

⁷⁵ Dunn maintains that despite her public pronouncements during 1983 and 1984 agreeing with her Secretary of State, Mrs Thatcher was never convinced that the idea of the voucher should be dropped, but was unwilling to publicly oppose her mentor and 'alter ego' since the 1970s. Dunn interview.

along with *irregulars* such as Robert Balchin, Caroline Cox, John Marks, Stuart Sexton and John Barnes. According to Balchin,

We were known as “Dunn’s dragoons” within the Department and we were basically trying to push forward some ideas from the right wing to Keith Joseph, with little success. During Keith Joseph’s time we did nothing but think about ideas because Keith Joseph wasn’t doing anything.⁷⁶

Out of these and no doubt other meetings emerged an alternative vision for the education system to that being pursued by Keith Joseph. In August 1985, this vision was made public by Dunn in a speech that was one of the most significant signposts in the direction of the 1988 Education Act. The system he was looking for, said Dunn, was one that, by the year 2000, would give Britain a system of ‘independent, separate schools, directly accountable to parents and free to manage their own budgets’. This could be achieved, not by one massive step, but by diverse routes and in what he called ‘gentle evolutionary steps’.⁷⁷ Letwin, echoing Dunn’s phrase, saw the way ahead as, ‘by slow degrees’ giving schools this experience, and by combining this with a system where ‘money followed the child’, effectively ending up with the same result as a voucher scheme.⁷⁸ From wherever it exactly originated, the notion of ‘gentle evolutionary steps’ or ‘slow degrees’ quickly came to dominate the tactics behind future proposals. Soon after, Dunn spoke to gatherings of the No Turning Back Group, the IEA and the CPS among others. As can be evidenced by Seldon’s proposals in *The Riddle of the Voucher* and elsewhere, with calls for ‘stepping stones’ and ‘half-way houses’ to a voucher system, the idea of the voucher principle delivered through discrete steps over a period of time was taken on board by the ‘network’.

⁷⁶ Balchin interview. During 1985 both Dunn and Rhodes Boyson (now at the DHSS), along with members of the No Turning Back Group also attended the ‘policy dinners’ organised by the 92 Group of MPs. According to the Group’s chairman, their aim was to make ‘a positive response to the debate on education policy within the party and uniting both paternalist-right and market right views, with the common aim of fixing items for a future manifesto’. George Gardiner quoted in Knight, *Tory Education Policy*, p. 184.

⁷⁷ The speech was made at a conference called an ‘International Symposium on the Open Society’ in August 1985. *TES*, 2 August 1985.

In pursuing his own course, Dunn had diverged sharply from the line being taken by Keith Joseph, who unsurprisingly passed over Dunn the following month to promote Chris Patten as his deputy.⁷⁹ According to his adviser, Dunn had been ‘going to the limit of what a junior minister could do and not get sacked’.⁸⁰ By late 1985, this was very unlikely to happen. Mrs Thatcher, who had already overcome her reticence about disagreeing with Keith Joseph in public, now decided to take an ever-closer interest in the education policies of her government. This was highlighted by the appointments of Letwin to the Policy Unit, followed by Brian Griffiths, and was partly due to the immense public concern over education that Sir Keith had been instrumental, both advertently and inadvertently, in engendering. There was also the pressing need to provide the Conservative Party with a coherent and radical education policy in the run up to the next election. This was something that Keith Joseph had singularly failed to do.

Keith Joseph’s Third Way

While the moves towards encouraging more ‘choice’ in education and devising a workable strategy to achieve this continued apace between 1983 and 1986, they were almost totally divorced from the work of the Secretary of State for Education, who found his time taken up with an altogether different agenda. The attempts since 1976 by some in the DES to impose greater central control over the curriculum ground on, but were eventually ground down, temporarily, during the early 1980s. There were a number of factors that contributed to this, including a failure on the part of LEAs to act, or to be made to act, a bureaucratic inertia within the DES itself, and the ideological opposition of the Secretary of State to extending state intervention. According to James Hamilton, the idea of some kind of a statutory national curriculum had ‘got a good way with Mark Carlisle but we

⁷⁸ Letwin interview.

⁷⁹ Patten, very much on the left of the Conservative Party, was as committed in his own way as Keith Joseph was, in trying to make the existing system work better, although he did not appear entirely confident that this could be achieved. ‘We must make this partnership work’, he told the Assistant Masters and Mistresses Association conference in 1986, ‘or else we shall need to find some other way of organising and running the nation’s schools’. *The Guardian*, 5 April 1986.

could not get over the opposition of LEAs to any kind of statutory intervention'.⁸¹ Within the Department, many officials remained 'bewitched by the LEAs' and either agonised over or opposed pushing for greater intervention. Even such a strong character as Hamilton found that 'Things can be debated to death in the Department and the system itself can steamroller over direct action by sheer inertia'.⁸² Nor, as we have seen, was Keith Joseph, either in terms of his approach to running the Department or from his own ideological background, the man to overcome this inertia.⁸³

The lack of some kind of direct intervention could hardly have been justified by the evidence provided by the LEAs themselves as regards their fitness in exercising control over what went on in their schools. Following the publication of *The School Curriculum*, in 1981, LEAs had been asked to review their policies and practices. In 1983, the Department issued *Circular 8/83*, requesting LEAs to report to the Secretary of State what progress had been made since 1981. Their responses could be seen as a pivotal piece of evidence as regards the advice Eric Bolton would later give Keith Joseph's successor, Kenneth Baker, over whether he should intervene in the school curriculum. Published in 1986, ten years after Ruskin, seven years after the 1979 *Local Authority Arrangements for the School Curriculum* which had highlighted the lack of knowledge and control LEAs exercised over the school curriculum, and five years after *The School Curriculum*, the response to *Circular 8/83* should have made salutary reading for any supporters of LEAs. The replies themselves varied

⁸⁰ Sexton interview.

⁸¹ Hamilton interview .

⁸² Ibid. Hamilton's frustration was also evident in his address he made to the Science Association after he had left the Department. *TES*, 1 July 1983. Some officials were never enamoured to Hamilton's 'outsider' status and his attempt to change the Departmental culture. 'He [Hamilton] didn't have any significant influence really', was the verdict of one Under Secretary. 'He had some ideas when he first came but they were unrealistic. He didn't make much difference for better or worse'. John Hudson, Deputy Secretary at the DES from 1972 –1979, quoted in Quoted in Davies-Griffith, 'The development of education policy', p. 164.

⁸³ When, in 1983, the Department published its summary of the curriculum debate so far, *Curriculum 11-16*, the Senior Chief inspector, Eric Bolton, wanted to include the phrase an 'entitlement curriculum' in the main title. The Secretary of State would have none of it. 'Keith Joseph would not allow the word "entitlement" to be used because of the implications it would have', recalled Bolton, 'and I only managed to squeeze it in as "Towards a statement of entitlement"'. Eric Bolton interview, 3 August 1998.

widely 'in form and in their degree of detail'.⁸⁴ As regards drawing up a curriculum policy, 'many authorities had only recently produced a policy statement or were still in the process of doing so'.⁸⁵ With the Report concluding that, 'As the Authorities themselves recognise, there is still much to be done to give their policies practical effect', it was not exactly a catalogue of confident advances on all fronts. According to one future Labour education minister, 'LEAs simply didn't pick up the messages and were not prepared to compromise'.⁸⁶ A slightly kinder explanation for the LEAs lack of progress and ambition in the area of curriculum planning was offered by Denis Lawton. 'LEAs didn't know what to do', said Lawton, 'Curriculum planning was left to professionals and, in the case of schools, often to the level of the individual professional. There had been a missed opportunity in the area of planning with the Schools Council, which had real power, real money, but were sidetracked into playing politics'.⁸⁷

The lack of any kind of unifying central control of the curriculum by LEAs might have been slightly less worrying, had schools themselves shown that they were capable of exercising some kind of micro-control at institutional level. But the evidence here was also not very encouraging. In the wake of the Ruskin speech, HMI had produced the reports on primary and secondary schools, published in 1977 and 1979 respectively. In primary schools, criticisms included a lack of progression in planning work, low expectations in inner city schools, inappropriate teaching methods and teacher expertise.⁸⁸ The report on secondary schools echoed some of these criticisms, as well as the quality and breadth of the curriculum. 'The curriculum', said the report, 'has no nationally defined content

⁸⁴ DES (1986) *Local Authority Policies for the School Curriculum. Report on the Circular 8/83 Review*. London: HMSO, p. 3.

⁸⁵ As regards developing and managing their teaching forces, coherence, breath and balance, continuity and progression, links with industry and commerce, and relevance, 'A number have formulated staffing policies which explicitly draw on objectives for the curriculum but they are not being put into effect... Some authorities, however, have little to say about coherence... although many authorities recognised in principle the importance of continuity between phases, relatively few described practical measures that would put it into effect... Some authorities reported the creation of working groups to investigate relevance and the practical content of the curriculum'. Ibid., p. 9.

⁸⁶ Tessa Blackstone interview, 27 August 1998.

⁸⁷ Lawton interview.

in this country', and went on to criticise the appropriateness of teaching styles, tied too closely as they were to the examination system, and the inadequacy of teachers' skills.⁸⁹

Five years later, little progress appeared to have been made. One of the few neo-liberal steps that Keith Joseph had actually introduced to help raise standards was the publication of HMI reports from 1982. By making the reports public, Keith Joseph felt that, as with the publication of examination results since 1980, parents-consumers would be better able to make informed choices about where they could send their children, always assuming that they did have an effective choice. In *Education Observed 2*, a review of reports written between January 1983 and March 1984, it was found that in primary schools, there had been little change since the HMI report in 1977.⁹⁰ In secondary schools, there were similar findings with continued low expectations and inappropriate teaching methods 'especially of pupils at the upper and lower ends of the ability range'.⁹¹

Still unable to bring himself to sanction either direct intervention into the curriculum, or to promote free market reforms, Keith Joseph initially felt that he could find a 'third way'. Combined with exhortation, this included reforms such as publishing HMI reports, improving teacher training, introducing a more vocational curriculum or option for some students, and perhaps most significantly, reforming the examination system.⁹² His Permanent Secretary at the time, although agreeing with the possibility of achieving change through exam reform, was less enthused by Keith Joseph's rationale for doing so.

'Concentration in exam work was the philosophy of despair', said James Hamilton, 'We couldn't get Ministers to impose their will on Local Education Authorities so the only central power was in examination reform'.⁹³ This

⁸⁸ DES (1977) *Primary Education in England: A Survey by HM Inspectors of Schools*. London: HMSO, Chapter 8, ii and passim.

⁸⁹ DES (1979) *Aspects of Secondary Education in England. A Survey by HM Inspectors of Schools*. London: HMSO, p. 266 and passim.

⁹⁰ DES (1984) *Education Observed 2. A review of reports by HMI Inspectors in primary schools and 11-16 and 12-16 Comprehensive Schools*. London: HMSO, pp. 1-6.

⁹¹ Ibid., 6-8.

⁹² In an interview with Stephen Ball, Keith Joseph said that 'short of going back to 1870, one is very limited in what one can do. Very limited. I tried to escape from that constraint by way of an examination reform'. Ball, *Politics and Policy Making*, p. 174.

⁹³ Hamilton interview.

‘philosophy of despair’ was too much for Hamilton and he resigned from the DES in 1983, returning to industry.⁹⁴ His verdict on the previous seven years was that the DES and by implication the politicians had ‘erred on the side of safety’; there still was ‘an argument for the DES acting more directly in certain limited areas of the curriculum’.⁹⁵

Although he shared many of the frustrations of those who worked with Keith Joseph, Hamilton’s successor, David Hancock also observed that his Secretary of State was ‘not always totally indecisive’ when the right issue arose. Chiming as it did with Joseph’s concern for the low level of attainment of the bottom 40 per cent, the implementation of a single examination was one of those issues. By any criteria, the move toward a single examination, the GCSE as it became, should have not got past a determined Conservative administration. During Mark Carlisle’s time, James Hamilton recalled the ‘great unease over the move to the new GCSE’, especially from Boyson and Sexton. But there was a friend in the political camp in the guise of the Minister of State, Lady Young, who was ‘towards the liberal wing of the Conservative Party’. ‘She was very close to the Prime Minister’, recalled Hamilton, ‘and it went ahead largely through her efforts to persuade Number Ten in favour of the GCSE, or at least not to oppose it’.⁹⁶ There remained a lot of persuading to do and David Hancock felt that the cause of the GCSE ‘still needed a strong Secretary of State to take it up’.⁹⁷ Surprisingly, that person proved to be Keith Joseph and as with many other things, the optimism of the opponents of the GCSE on his appointment, was soon dispelled in the face of his acceptance of the single exam. According to Eric Bolton, ‘The approval of the GCSE by Keith Joseph, the arch elitist, really shook Number Ten. The Oliver Letwins never could and never would accept the idea’.⁹⁸ Not only did it ‘shake’ Number Ten, but a lesser figure than Joseph may not have managed to push it through. ‘There was pressure from Number Ten and the

⁹⁴ Hamilton’s replacement was the more orthodox mandarin, David Hancock. When asked about the perception of his immediate predecessor as the ‘great centralist’ in the light of his inheritance, Hancock could only manage the almost wistful comment that ‘If Hamilton was a great centralist, he didn’t succeed very well’. Hancock interview.

⁹⁵ *TES*, 1 July 1983.

⁹⁶ Hamilton interview.

⁹⁷ Hancock interview.

⁹⁸ Bolton interview.

political right not to approve it', Sexton later said, 'But in the end Mrs Thatcher couldn't stop him. After all, it had been her own mentor, Sir Keith Joseph, who had said we could no longer continue to have a well-educated elite and the lumpen remainder'.⁹⁹

In approving the examination, Joseph no doubt felt that he could manage its development and implementation on his own terms. For one thing, there would be no Schools Council involvement. There would, in fact, be no Schools Council. The question of the Council itself had been unfinished business for some within the Department, notably Walter Ulrich, since at least the publication of the *Yellow Book*. In 1984 it was abolished, to be replaced by two bodies. In an experience to be replicated in turn by their replacements after the introduction of the National Curriculum, all the members to the Schools Curriculum Development Committee (SCDC) and the Schools Examinations Committee (SEC), were to be appointed by the Secretary of State. Keith Joseph clearly hoped that he could both cater for the full ability ranges, yet ensure the rigour of the examination through controlling the assessment criteria. The new SEC was to appraise the draft national criteria and advise the Secretary of State, with whom the final decision would rest. In this, however, Keith Joseph's reach vastly exceeded his grasp. John Marks recalled one instance when 'Keith Joseph turned up at a meeting with the new GCSE criteria and pored over and agonised over which of these would be set in stone to lever standards up'.¹⁰⁰ The saga of devising and agreeing the new criteria may have been a mere novella compared with the later opus of the National Curriculum, but it was far too much for any Secretary of State to hope to monitor and control, especially for one as prone to indecision as Keith Joseph. His colleagues on the right were never reconciled to the GCSE, seeing it as yet another example of the educational establishment having pulled a 'fast one' on Keith Joseph. Out of office, Joseph himself was inclined to agree with them:

Stretching was my favourite word; I judged that if you lent on that much else would follow. That's what my officials encouraged me to imagine I

⁹⁹ Quoted in Phillips, *All Must Have Prizes*, p. 138.

was achieving...and now I find that unconsciously I have allowed teacher assessment, to a greater extent than I assumed. My fault...my fault...it's flabby.¹⁰¹

Conclusion

In many ways, with Joseph's legacy to his successor, the whole was greater than the sum of the parts. His own verdict was that, 'I think what I can claim to have achieved is to have shifted the emphasis from quantity to quality'.¹⁰² While there is a strong case for agreeing with Keith Joseph's own evaluation of his time at the DES, at a time of financial stringency, he may have willed the ends but he was unwilling to provide the means. His biographer's verdict on Keith Joseph's parsimony was that 'There was also a point where Keith Joseph perhaps needed to be saved from his own financial conscience'.¹⁰³ Another blindspot, as it was with many of his successors, was his dealings with the teachers that led to the prolonged and bitter strikes of the mid-1980s. Despite his own protestations about how he frequently was willing to praise the work of the teaching profession, many felt that his heart was not in it. Nor were they incorrect. According to Hancock, 'He (Joseph) had a violent prejudice against the teaching profession the nature of which I never understood. He was unreasonably tough and never understood or cared about the damage he was causing in the challenge to raise standards'.¹⁰⁴

While his war of attrition with the teacher unions helped prepare the ground for Kenneth Baker's later steamrolling of the profession, like much of

¹⁰⁰ Marks interview.

¹⁰¹ Ball, *Politics and Policy Making*, p. 174. Some officials were not too enamoured with how the GCSE had been devised and implemented. According to Clive Saville 'The GCSE was a disaster that blew back on the National Curriculum'. Saville interview.

¹⁰² Ribbins and Sherratt, *Radical Education Policies*, p. 83.

¹⁰³ Halcrow, *Single Mind*, p. 167. Sexton recalled that Mark Carlisle would come back to the Department 'bleeding' from his bouts with the Treasury in his attempts to defend education spending. Eric Bolton's recollection of Keith Joseph was often how 'in meetings with people he (Keith Joseph) would accept their case but finish by saying that he couldn't bring himself to go to the Treasury to ask for money. More surprisingly he often got away without any argument as he was so respected for his views'. Sexton in Denham, A. and Garnett, M. (2001) *Keith Joseph*. Chesham: Acumen, p. 368, and Bolton interview.

¹⁰⁴ Hancock interview.

Keith Joseph's legacy, it was unintended. The publicity garnered by the teacher strikes helped push education up the public and political agenda, as thoughts of the next election began to take hold in Downing Street.¹⁰⁵ His failure to pursue his market instincts, other than keeping public spending down, led to alternative policies for the introduction of market forces being developed within and around his own Party. The process by which these policies were developed, which effectively by-passed the existing policy community, would provide a template for future attempts at policy development. Prior to the 1983 election, the main focus for the *irregulars* had been the battle for the implementation of the long cherished education voucher. This battle was lost, primarily because there remained a large vacant space between the existing schools system and the *gotterdammerung* of a voucher system, a space – whether political, practical, educational or financial - that many felt was too far to cross. Following the 1983 election, there was a tactical reappraisal by the *irregulars* of the methods by which greater choice could be introduced into the education system, with a type of voucher system as the lodestar rather than the immediate demand. While Keith Joseph remained in post, this strand of policy remained unloved and unexploited.

While these developments took place out of public sight, Keith Joseph's decision to work very much within the grain of the *regular* agenda, concealed the danger to the influence of the traditional 'partners' that was brewing off stage. It also concealed the growing divergence within that grouping itself, in particular, between the LEAs and the DES. In documents such as the HMI reports we can see the background context to Keith Joseph's chosen course of trying to raise standards in comprehensives, but also the continuing difficulty in achieving this primarily through exhortation. The LEAs' responses, and the evidence from schools, were demonstrating that the necessary coherence and relevance in the curriculum, and the competence in the classroom, were lacking. Yet here too, Keith Joseph's 'this far and no more' exhortational stance to curriculum control, despite the evidence of the bankruptcy of this approach, also left this strand of

¹⁰⁵ Even before the prolonged teacher strikes, after the SAU published the very much tongue-in-cheek, *Detecting Bad Schools. A Guide for Normal Parents*, Digby Anderson recalled his surprise at being immediately asked 'to appear on 19 TV and radio shows. What this demonstrated was that there was an enormous hunger for people to say unsayable things about schools and teachers. It legitimised the notion that "it is reasonable to give teachers a rough time"'. Anderson interview.

educational policy ‘in the air’. By 1986, among Keith Joseph’s legacies to his successor were the parallel arguments between his *irregular* and *regular* advisers. The latter argued for more central and in particular, more curriculum control. The former insisted on the introduction of market forces into the education system. Keith Joseph never came close to reconciling either of these approaches. Michael Foot once described Keith Joseph as being like ‘a hapless magician-conjuror, who smashes a watch and then forgets the rest of the trick’.¹⁰⁶ By 1986, with a general election looming, Mrs Thatcher decided that it was time to call on a more adept ‘magician-conjuror’, one who might be able to fit all the disparate pieces together.

¹⁰⁶ Denham and Garnett, *Keith Joseph*, p. 363.

CHAPTER 5

May 1986 – July 1989: *Dash for Glory*

Introduction

A tired and almost broken Keith Joseph resigned in May 1986.¹ In his letter to Mrs Thatcher he indicated that ‘A fresh voice was needed at the DES to carry forward and develop our policies’.² The ‘fresh voice’ that did follow Keith Joseph was to be that of Kenneth Baker, who did indeed provide a totally new sense of élan and urgency to education policy. Yet for someone who publicly appeared so dominant at the time, his contribution to the policy-making process was subject to dispute almost from the day of his appointment. A typical view was aired in *Education*. As regards Baker’s contribution to the education proposals in the 1987 manifesto, it was said that ‘Despite months of careful grooming it is clear that his Party’s manifesto was prepared in his absence with Mrs Thatcher calling the shots...(Baker’s) control seems to have been largely cosmetic and presentational’.³ This chapter examines Kenneth Baker and his contribution to the policy process between 1986 and 1987. What was the immediate context in which the policy proposals emerged? Who else was involved in this process and what were their contributions and influence? What were the implications of this new process for future decisions and directions?

Enter the Renaissance Man

Whatever qualities other Secretaries of State brought to the job, none certainly seemed to have brought the same sense of fun as Kenneth Baker. John Caines, who worked with Baker at the Department of Trade and Industry and was later

¹ ‘By the end of 1985 Keith Joseph had run out of steam as anyone could see. He wanted out. He was tired and he was ill and a lot of things had gone wrong. He’d had a great battering’. Richard Bird, Deputy Secretary at the DES from 1980-90, quoted in Davies-Griffith, ‘The development of education policy’, p. 145.

² Quoted in Lawton, D. (1992) *Education and Politics in the 1990s. Conflict or Consensus?* Lewes: Falmer Press, p. 42.

³ *Education*, 29 May 1987.

Permanent Secretary during Baker's last weeks at the DES, described him as 'an engaging character who operated on sheer bravado, a real high wire artist'.⁴ In order to achieve Cabinet office under Mrs Thatcher, Baker had considerably trimmed his sails since working as Edward Heath's Parliamentary Private Secretary, and as organiser of Heath's unsuccessful campaign against Mrs Thatcher in 1975. In his memoirs, Baker claims that he had two watchwords, 'standards and choice',⁵ although 'Kenneth and Baker' might have been more apt. It was unlikely that he ever was 'one of us'. He certainly was never a neo-liberal, but he knew which script would play well with Number Ten. The education system, he would argue in words that echoed the Adam Smith Institute, had become 'producer dominated', a 'new vitality' had to be injected into it to 'raise standards' and 'extend choice'.⁶

Baker, the 'supreme pragmatist',⁷ could adopt such a mantle with little or no self-consciousness. He was someone with 'an air of absolute certainty, not beset by any intellectual doubts as was his more thoughtfully and philosophically minded predecessor',⁸ something he himself was happy to acknowledge. 'I was not as intellectually distinguished as Keith', he later told a journalist, 'but I was a doer'.⁹ In terms of what exactly this 'doer' was intended to 'do', Baker recalled,

I think Margaret appointed me to that job to do things. I inherited a series of crises. Fires had to be fought and fires had to be put out. Mrs Thatcher simply said "Get a grip". She didn't tell me to do anything at all, just talk to Keith Joseph to see what is needed. I am convinced that she did not have any agenda for reform. Perhaps some of her advisers had but she had not turned her mind to it. She was still full of angst and anger at her time at Education and just wanted someone to sort it out and not bother

⁴ Caines interview. In an unmerited tone of condescension John Major described Baker as 'political reflex made flesh...more suited to a different more fluid era of politics'. Major, *John Major*, p. 208, 350.

⁵ Baker, *Turbulent Years*, p. 165.

⁶ *Hansard*, House of Commons, vol. 123, col. 771, 1 December 1987.

⁷ Wilby, P. 'Close up: Kenneth Baker', *Marxism Today*, April 1987.

⁸ M. Morris and C. Griggs, 'Thirteen wasted years?' in M. Morris and C. Griggs (eds.) (1988) *Education - The Wasted Years 1973-1986*. Lewes: Falmer Press, p. 21.

⁹ 'Why are you still smiling Kenneth?' *TES*, 31 May 1996.

her to get it done. Then some of the debates triggered her own instincts and prejudices later on.¹⁰

Clearly eager for political success, he was not retiring about his political ambitions. After having interviewed him for a newspaper profile, one journalist reflected that ‘in his replies...there was little attempt to conceal the fact that he sees the Education Reform Act as a test of his qualities for the leadership when the time comes’.¹¹ Few of his colleagues shared this belief. Mrs Thatcher’s ungenerous verdict in her memoirs was that she simply hoped he would make up ‘in presentational flair whatever he lacked in attention to detail’.¹² Yet while Baker was ambitious, he was transparently so and it was this transparency, obvious to all and sundry, that contributed much to his charm. He was also capable of paying ‘attention to detail’ when it suited his purposes. As someone whom one official described as ‘the consummate politician, never unaware of possible political outcomes’,¹³ prior to being appointed, Baker had been eyeing up how Education could provide just such an opportunity for advancement. ‘I was aware of issues stirring in the education world from my time as Environment Secretary’, he recalled a decade later: ‘Keith Joseph had raised the issue of quality, an area that the education establishment did not want to see raised or interfered with and they saw him off’.¹⁴ Just how ‘aware’ Baker had been of the opportunities the DES might provide, surprised even his closest colleagues. According to his adviser, Tony Kerpel,

¹⁰ Kenneth Baker interview. 17 November 1998.

¹¹ ‘Playing a long game’, *The Independent*, 23 September 1988.

¹² Thatcher, *Downing Street Years*, p. 589. Nigel Lawson’s verdict was that Baker was ‘a most civilised man with an agreeably sunny disposition but not even his greatest friends would describe him as a profound thinker or a man with a mastery of detail’. Lawson, N. (1992) *The View from No.11*. London: Bantam Press, p. 606.

¹³ Owen interview. As a testament to Baker’s political antennae, John Caines described one incident during the early days of opting out, when there was ‘a big row’ over a prominent Roman Catholic school that wished to go Grant Maintained. Basil Hume, the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Westminster, was insisting that the vote would not take place. According to Caines, ‘Kenneth Baker insisted that it would. It was the law of the land. I advised Baker that he was in danger of creating a martyr, perhaps even sending him (Hume) to jail, this humble and serene man. Baker simply said, “This is not about humility. It is about power and Basil Hume knows as much about power as any of us.” Hume backed down’. Caines interview.

¹⁴ Baker interview.

Although it was not much of a surprise that Baker was appointed as Keith Joseph's successor - he had been angling for it for a long time - what surprised me was how quickly he hit the ground running. Baker certainly had a greater knowledge of Education than I had appreciated. He very quickly had meetings with officials and put forward a raft of ideas. He had clearly been sizing up Education from his position at Environment.¹⁵

One aspect that had been exercising Baker was his Civil Servants at the DES. Through his own observations and discussions with colleagues, and in particular David Young at the Manpower Services Commission (MSC), Baker was aware of the nature of the senior officials and the perceived culture within the Department.¹⁶ In his memoirs, Baker described the DES as 'among those with the strongest in-house ideology'.¹⁷ Singled out as the real locus of power within the Schools Branch was Walter Ulrich, whom Baker described as a purveyor of 'formidable intellectual bullying'¹⁸ and the 'main intellectual seducer of Keith Joseph'.¹⁹ The other 'locus of power' in the Department was Nick Stuart, and after Ulrich's retirement in 1987, Baker would work closely with Stuart dealing with the 1988 Act. Baker described him as 'very authoritarian, very autocratic and arrogant'. At the same time 'He (Stuart) was also someone who serves his masters well if he thinks they will be winners'. The new Secretary of State certainly felt that the existing Permanent Secretary, the emollient David Hancock, who was later described as having 'a managerial rather than a magisterial view of the education service',²⁰ was not his ideal. Damning him with faint praise as someone who 'took very seriously his role as Accounting Officer

¹⁵ Kerpel interview.

¹⁶ Baker interview.

¹⁷ Baker, *Turbulent Years*, p. 168. Baker's adviser also recalled how starkly the impression that education was 'too insular, that it would benefit from outside influence' was brought into sharp relief on Baker's first day at the DES: 'Kenneth Baker and myself were met on the steps of Elizabeth House by Nick Stuart whom I had known back in 1969 and this only reinforced the notion of the impenetrability of the Whitehall culture'. Kerpel interview.

¹⁸ Baker, *Turbulent Years*, p. 167.

¹⁹ Baker interview.

²⁰ *Education*, 12 May 1989. When questioned by the Education, Arts and Science Committee (ESAC) of the Commons in 1988 about 'productivity' in the DES, Hancock replied that 'Productivity is almost impossible to measure in a policy department like the DES...but the Department has told me that they are working very much harder'. Lawrence, I. (1992) *Power and Politics at the Department of Education and Science*, London: Cassell p. 117.

for the universities, and the world of higher education',²¹ Baker initially tried to have Hancock replaced as well as bringing in some 'new blood' into the top echelons of the DES. According to Tony Kerpel, 'Baker tried but was unable to get Geoffrey Holland over from the MSC. The appointment of people like Jenny Bacon (from the MSC) was part of a general reassessment of the role of education'.²²

Baker himself said that he 'considered the appointment of Jenny Bacon in great detail with David Hancock. She was a breath of fresh air, a force for change'.²³ Bacon would later be responsible for producing perhaps the most contentious document of the period, *The National Curriculum 5-16*. She was certainly aware of the context of her transfer, both to Baker's immediate ambitions, and also to those within the Department who had been manoeuvring for greater DES control over the curriculum:

I was seen by Walter Ulrich and Nick Stuart as useful for taking forward some of the things the DES lifers wanted. They needed a pair of hob nail boots. The MSC was for the fast stream Civil Servants who had a can do approach. We were more open and less intellectual than the DES Civil Servants who were very bright and tabled very erudite submissions to ministers. My submissions were far less erudite and agonised. They were more brutal and confronted Ministers with decisions to be made.²⁴

Despite some early teething troubles, Baker felt that he soon 'made it clear that I had an agenda which I expected officials to deliver. There was only room for one boss in my Departments'.²⁵ To a point, this was true. Like a dashing general, Baker led from the front. After the torpor and indecision of previous years, the Department was no doubt delighted to have a new dynamic figure in charge, someone unambiguously on the way up for a change. They were also very aware

²¹ Baker, *Turbulent Years*, p. 166.

²² Kerpel interview.

²³ Baker interview.

²⁴ Bacon interview. A interesting comparison of the differing cultures within the DES and the MSC can be found in Franklin, 'The MSC, the DES and the Origins of the TVEI'. See e.g. p. 343 where the author provides a table of the contrasting institutional characteristics.

²⁵ Baker, *Turbulent Years*, p. 167.

that Baker's eyes were firmly fixed on possible political prizes somewhere down the line, and that he had neither the time, nor the inclination to bother about the logistics of his proposals. One education journalist described how, on one overseas trip with Baker, 'the Civil Servants would bring great boxes of papers and his (Baker's) eyes would glaze over. The papers were soon put away and he would take out a poetry book'.²⁶ His adviser's assessment was that 'Baker had a very quick intelligence. He could cut to the chase very quickly. But that did not ensure that all the nuts and bolts were tightened down before he embarked on a project. He was not intellectually fastidious, not a reflective person'.²⁷ As such, there developed almost a kind of Faustian pact between Secretary of State and his senior officials. They would work with him on delivering his preferred ideas, while he was happy to leave the nitty gritty to his officials, as, indeed, they were delighted to accept, knowing full well that the devil lay in the detail. This arrangement may have suited both parties at the time, but it only served to alienate many of Baker's erstwhile political colleagues and stored up trouble for his successors.

If his former mentor, Heath, had his 'dash for growth', Baker had his own 'dash for glory'.²⁸ During his first year, he launched a series of education initiatives, leaving the Education world and his department reportedly 'huffing and puffing' to keep up as the ideas came 'thick and fast'.²⁹ The immediate agenda, also key to Baker's already gestating plans for reform, was the issue of the ongoing union action. The prolonged industrial action under Keith Joseph had depleted both public goodwill and their members' morale. Baker was quick to capitalise on this. 'You can't overestimate the importance of that strike', he later said, 'I took away all negotiating rights from the union. It was quite brutal. . . It was absolutely extreme stuff'.³⁰ After 'dispensing' with the union problem, the first new policy was unveiled at the Conservative Party Conference in October 1986, the establishment of a series of City Technology Colleges (CTCs).

²⁶ Clare interview.

²⁷ Kerpel interview.

²⁸ Edward Heath's gamble in 1973 to reflate the economy was known as the 'dash for growth'. See Campbell, J. (1993) *Edward Heath. A Biography*. London: Jonathon Cape, Ch. 28.

²⁹ Wilby, 'Kenneth Baker'. Even his adviser was somewhat overwhelmed at the speed of developments. 'Initiatives rather snowballed', said Kerpel, 'In managerial terms, Kenneth Baker wanted a "big bang" rather than a piecemeal approach'. Kerpel interview.

³⁰ 'How a political coup bred educational disaster', *The Guardian*, 16 September 1999.

In December, he announced his intention to set up a national curriculum. The following month, at the North Of England Conference, Baker expanded on this, saying that he believed the ‘present system, locally administered’ was ‘maverick, eccentric and muddled’. In April, he announced to the House of Commons Select Committee on Education that the efficiency of the new National Curriculum would be measured by tests for pupils at ages 7, 11 and 14. A few days later, at the Secondary Heads Association Conference, he announced plans to devolve financial control of schools to heads and governors. Finally, at the end of a busy April, he gave ‘the clearest hint’ that a re-elected Conservative government would ‘allow schools to opt out of the Local Education Authority system’, and that CTCs would ‘point the way ahead for many other types of schools after the election’.³¹

In this series of announcements, Baker had outlined the basis for the next Tory manifesto, and indeed the Education Reform Act of 1988. Some would interpret his proposals as part of some great educational master plan or conspiracy by the right wing of the Conservative Party, with Baker having ‘succumbed to the influence of such extremist groupings as the Hillgate Group and Institute of Economic Affairs’.³² But Baker’s approach, both by personal instinct and by political necessity was completely broad-brush. He was like a Jackson Pollock, splashing colours all over the education canvass, leaving others to read into it what they will. Perhaps the most accurate assessment of what happened was provided by Denis Lawton: ‘I don’t think that there was a conspiracy among the right-wing groups, but there was enough of an agreement among them to get things through. There might have been a lack of coherence but there were several little messages’.³³ Only a consummate political broker or fixer, such as Baker, would have been able to find a settlement, which would keep the party and its allies united in the run up to the general election just over a year away. This he achieved with a political flair that his predecessor so singularly and uncompromisingly lacked. Yet the Baker ‘settlement’ was a highly unstable edifice, unsurprisingly so given the range of ‘little messages’ that

³¹ For various reports on these announcements, see, *The Independent*, 7 October 1986; *TES*, 16 January 1987, 10 April 1987, 1 May 1987.

³² Chitty, C. ‘Two Models of a National Curriculum: origins and interpretation’, in Lawton and Chitty, *National Curriculum*, pp. 45-46.

were swirling around education policy at the time from the *politicos*, the *regulars* and the *irregulars*.

Pragmatist under pressure

Given the ongoing internal tensions and debates there would have been within the DES, and the very public onslaught of ideas that were being generated by the *irregulars* during 1986-87, it is little wonder that even as nimble-footed an operator as Kenneth Baker found himself under enormous pressure at this time. One commentator recalled that, ‘There were times when I think Baker was overwhelmed by the challenge of carrying so many people with him’.³⁴ Part of this pressure was obviously self-generated. With his own long-term ambitions firmly in mind, Baker saw this period as, in many ways, the key to his successful stewardship of Education:

The critical element was the crystallisation of ideas prior to the 1987 manifesto. The manifesto had several pages on education. Margaret wanted to get something done on social reform and I wanted to pin the party down.³⁵

Like other ministerial colleagues from this era, Baker has dismissed any notion that the *irregulars* could have possibly influenced his policy decisions. ‘I was aware that they (outside advisers) were in the background, briefing Margaret’, he recalled. ‘But they had no major effect on any changes that we brought in. I am absolutely sure of that’.³⁶ Baker also had to deal with an added element of pressure with which his predecessors did not have to contend. This was the willingness of a powerful Prime Minister to intervene in the detail of education policy, and who had a network of allies with whom she was very publicly

³³ Lawton interview.

³⁴ Wilby interview.

³⁵ Baker interview.

³⁶ Ibid. This view was backed by Kerpel: ‘I had little time for outside advisers but only as ginger groups. It did help to have some people on the outside with their own platforms and questioning the orthodoxies. The education establishment had their own platforms with which they would regularly attack the government. But you shouldn’t read anything into having meetings with them. It was only good political sense’. Kerpel interview.

aligned. It was well known that the No Turing Back Group were very much her favourites and according to Michael Fallon, 'We were all pushing very hard on education. We weren't beating up on Kenneth Baker but there was a rigorous amount of egging on'.³⁷ Mrs Thatcher's own creation, the CPS, was another source. Although John Marks recalled that he had to 'fight like mad to get Kenneth Baker to come to the ESG meetings',³⁸ after one such meeting Baker was reported to have remarked in exasperation to Kerpel that, 'these are the people setting the education agenda'.³⁹

In July 1986, the NTBG had produced their proposals as requested the previous November.⁴⁰ The subsequent pamphlet was called *SOS: Save Our Schools*.⁴¹ This proposed the creation of independent school boards dominated by parents; direct funding of schools by the DES on the basis of the number of pupils enrolled, with the schools free to spend the grant as they wished and LEAs becoming 'vestigial' and advisory in most functions; and the right of parents to send their children to any school prepared to accept them. The Group was reported to believe that their ideas were in tune with those of Mrs Thatcher, who promised that the pamphlet would be required reading for her Education Secretary over the summer holiday.⁴² According to Eric Forth, a member of the Group and later Baker's PPS, 'Mrs Thatcher felt a bit guilty as very little had been done. Everybody woke up in the 1980s and ideas came tumbling out. We (the NTBG) were trying to create a more radical framework for the discussion of education policy'.⁴³ Baker, who was shown a draft copy, was equally reported to have been furious with its contents, insisting on changes prior to publication.

³⁷ Fallon interview.

³⁸ Marks interview.

³⁹ Wilby and Midgely, *As the New Right wields its power*.

⁴⁰ How their eventual proposals were shaping up and how much emphasis and importance was being placed on education reform, can be gauged from the fact that, in March 1986, the leading light of the NTBG, Michael Portillo, used a rare slice of Commons time allocated to backbenchers to press the case for greater parental choice in education. 'Trust parents', Portillo urged the government, 'give them responsibility and they will prove to be responsible. I would rather rely on the collective wisdom of parents than on the accumulated wisdom of Civil Servants, educationists, and dare I say, ministers'. Gove, *Portillo*, p. 143.

⁴¹ According to Madsen Pirie the process described by Michael Gove in producing the first pamphlet was given a slightly different spin for the preparation of this second NTBG pamphlet. 'I wrote every word of *Save Our Schools*', recalled Pirie, 'and then wrote an editorial for the *Telegraph* praising the pamphlet. I actually charged £1000 and did it on the understanding that I didn't have to read any of the papers prepared by Forsyth'. Pirie interview.

⁴² *Sunday Times*, 20 July 1986.

Although the main proposals remained unchanged, some of the Group's criticisms of the state education system that could have been considered as critical of the government, and some 'fairly intemperate remarks' about officials and teachers, were toned down.⁴⁴

At least Baker had the benefit of seeing these proposals prior to publication, as unbeknown to him at the time, his Cabinet colleague, Nigel Lawson, had decided to put his own personal proposals on education reform to Mrs Thatcher. Lawson believed that 'it was hard to imagine that we would get from Kenneth the fundamental thinking about education reform that I am sure was needed'.⁴⁵ His proposals, variations of which would continue to surface throughout the 1990s, involved taking education finance 'off the rates' and entirely out of the hands of LEAs (placing it of course into hands of the Treasury), a core curriculum, and devolved budgets.⁴⁶ Although Mrs Thatcher decided not to take on the LEAs to this extent in 1987, it was at this time according to Lawson that she set up a Cabinet Sub-Committee to deal with education reform. The sub-committee consisted of Mrs Thatcher herself in the chair, Brian Griffiths as Head of the Policy Unit, Baker and Lawson. Meanwhile, Bob Dunn, who had kept his position after Baker's appointment, was to take an increasingly-prominent role in the lead up to, and during, the election campaign. In July 1986, he made an uncompromising call to 'privatise education', with the role of the state being confined to helping those who are not properly catered for in a free market system'.⁴⁷ Almost the same day, Sir John Hoskyns, former head of the Number Ten Policy Unit and then Director General of the Institute of Directors, urged the preparation of a radical Tory manifesto with education credits to be introduced in the longer term, and spending on welfare in general to be reduced to ensure that it targeted only those 'in greatest need'.⁴⁸ This same call was reiterated in Stuart Sexton's *Our Schools: A Radical Policy*, published the following year.

⁴³ Forth interview.

⁴⁴ *TES*, 25 July 1986.

⁴⁵ Lawson, *View from No.11*, p. 606.

⁴⁶ Lawson's over-inflated claims of influence were unanimously derided by officials and politicians interviewed for one study of the 1988 Act. See Davies-Griffith, 'The development of education policy', pp. 159-161.

⁴⁷ *TES*, 4 August 1986.

One of Baker's first actions on being appointed was to replace Sexton with his own adviser, Tony Kerpel. Baker claims he sacked Sexton, though the latter claims he left.⁴⁹ Both men had known each other previously, at one point serving on the Sherlock Committee set up by Carlisle in 1981 to report on the then extant Inner London Education Authority. There was very little love lost between them. 'I was uneasy with him', said Baker, 'He was an uncertain person, an intriguer. Not the person to go tiger shooting with'.⁵⁰ With Sexton's departure also went the role of specialist education adviser within the Department. In a way, education as an issue had, or was about to achieve a political prominence that would outgrow any single adviser. None would subsequently find themselves in the position where, at one point, Sexton claimed he was writing questions for backbenchers to ask Keith Joseph at Ministers' questions, and then being asked by Joseph to write his reply at the despatch box.⁵¹ Advisers from now on were entirely political creatures, and some would be better than others. Perhaps the most effective in this role was Sexton's successor, Tony Kerpel.⁵² From the outset, Kerpel saw his role as very different to that of Sexton:

Keith Joseph's relationship with Stuart Sexton was not productive in the Department as there were too many antagonisms. The special adviser needs to be self-effacing and not a wannabe Cabinet Minister. He is more like a rock and roll manager keeping the show on the road rather than a professor. I was interested in the politics of policy – "How was it going to float?"- and not a supernumerary Civil Servant. Kenneth Baker's timetable was short term. His ideas were controversial and needed selling.

⁴⁸ Quoted in Simon, *Education and the Social Order*, p. 529

⁴⁹ Sexton tells a colourful story of Baker's first day at the DES, his own last. 'Baker arrived early before I had cleared my desk', recalled Sexton, 'Baker's secretary then rang to summon me to the new Secretary of State's office. As soon as I entered the room, Baker called over to him from behind that enormous desk, "I'm not a centraliser you know"; I said, "Oh but you are Kenneth", whereupon Baker just smiled and said, "Cheerio then"'. Exit Sexton. Sexton interview.

⁵⁰ Baker interview.

⁵¹ Sexton interview.

⁵² Kerpel had been Chairman of the Young Conservatives, after which he had a brief spell in the Press Office at the DES before leaving to join the British Board of Film Censors. He stood unsuccessfully as a Conservative candidate in Holborn and St Pancras in 1983 and then was co-ordinator of the Conservative groups on the rate capped London councils. He already knew Baker from meetings when the former was a junior Minister at the DoE before becoming his adviser in 1986. Kerpel interview and profiles in *Education*, 30 May 1986, and *TES*, 28 April 1989.

Keith Joseph had been damaged politically by not being sharp enough and decisive enough.⁵³

It was a role with which the Department was equally comfortable. David Hancock described Kerpel as ‘very laid back, cynical, witty and very funny. He didn’t have a personal agenda like Sexton and Letwin’.⁵⁴ Kerpel’s replacement of Sexton left the latter at somewhat of a loose end. With the developing momentum of the education agenda it was clearly felt that Sexton’s knowledge was too valuable not to be put to use. Brian Griffiths, Head of the Number Ten Policy Unit, perhaps on the prompting of Mrs Thatcher, asked Lord Harris to find a role for Sexton within the IEA. With his new title as Head of the Education Unit, Sexton published *Our Schools, A Radical Manifesto*.⁵⁵ In this pamphlet, Sexton outlined the by-now-familiar demands of the neo-liberals for market forces to create ‘a direct financial relationship between the provider and the consumer’. In line with the gradualist approach adopted by the New Right after 1985, there was support for a phased introduction of vouchers, or credits, after first adapting ‘the structure and finance of education so that a full education credit scheme, by common consent, logically and legitimately, springs from it’.⁵⁶

While this neo-liberal onslaught was incessant, Baker also now came under increasing pressure from the neo-conservatives. The key body in this respect was the Hillgate Group, formed in 1986 and comprising of Caroline Cox, John Marks, Roger Scruton and Jessica Douglas Home. During the mid-1980s, they, and other ‘right thinking’ colleagues, such as Dennis O’Keeffe, had been increasingly concerned about what was actually being taught, or not being taught, in schools. In particular, they objected to what they perceived as a

⁵³ Kerpel interview.

⁵⁴ Hancock interview. Jenny Bacon felt that he was ‘bright and pretty helpful as a mediator. He was good and sensible and very much like a traditional political adviser’. Angela Rumbold, later to join Baker as Minister of State also saw that ‘Tony Kerpel was a good counter balance to Kenneth. He had common sense’. Bacon interview and Angela Rumbold interview, 27 October 1998.

⁵⁵ Sexton, undoubtedly one of the sources responsible for denigrating Baker’s contribution to the education proposals, claims that *Our Schools* was simply a new draft of a document that he had already given to Mrs Thatcher in late 1985 after she had apparently asked him ‘Where should we be going?’ as regards education policy. She in turn supposedly gave the document to Baker on his appointment and said that this was what he had to implement. Sexton interview.

⁵⁶ Sexton, S. (1987) *Our Schools: A Radical Policy*. Warlingham: Institute of Economic Affairs, p. 30.

dangerous and pernicious left-wing bias. Scruton and O’Keeffe had already published *Education and Indoctrination* in 1985 and at Caroline Cox’s request, O’Keeffe had then edited *The Wayward Curriculum* for the Social Affairs Unit, also in 1985.⁵⁷ In 1986, according to Roger Scruton, they had been quietly encouraged by an adviser in Downing Street to create a pressure group that would toughen up Party policy. ‘We were told’, Scruton said, ‘it would be much easier for the government to have a strong education policy if there was some outside pressure for it’.⁵⁸

In collating and condensing previous arguments, the first Hillgate pamphlet, *Whose Schools; A Radical Manifesto*, published in December 1986, would play a similar role for the neo-conservatives to that which Sexton’s *Our Schools* of the following year would play for the neo-liberal agenda. In sympathy with the neo-liberal agenda, Hillgate advocated transferring the ownership of schools to individual trusts, giving parents partial control over the financing of the schools their children will attend, and introducing educational credits. Where the neo-conservatives departed from the neo-liberals was over the question of curriculum control. Although the stance in *Whose Schools* was unequivocal - ‘We believe that a national curriculum is essential’⁵⁹ – some, such as Caroline Cox, were reluctant advocates: ‘It was the lesser of two evils. The only reason I supported it was because we were really falling behind. It’s a powerful tool in the wrong hands’.⁶⁰ Hillgate supported the introduction of a national curriculum, certainly in the short term as a means of eliminating the influence and ideology of the educational establishment, LEAs in particular. ‘Politicised Local Education Authorities’, argued *Whose Schools*, ‘must be deprived of their major

⁵⁷ O’Keeffe interview. Pressure from sources such as these already had had an impact as evidenced by the proposals for the teaching of sex education in schools in the 1986 Education Act.

⁵⁸ Boyd, *Voice for the Voiceless*, p. 409. This was no doubt true but there were other tensions within the neo-conservatives that also contributed to Hillgate. In particular, the support that members of the Education Study Group at the CPS had been giving to Ray Honeyford, a former primary school headmaster in Bradford, who had become embroiled in a race dispute over an article he had written for the *Salisbury Review*. When the CPS published a paper criticizing Honeyford, Cox and Marks resigned temporarily from the CPS. Dr. Sheila Lawlor was then brought into the CPS as Director of Studies. According to Lawlor, ‘I was brought into the CPS by Brian Griffiths. The ESG was seen as out of control and needed to be reined in. The Hillgate Group was the ESG under a different guise as the Centre was reluctant to publish their pamphlet’. Sheila Lawlor interview, 26 February 1998.

⁵⁹ Hillgate Group (1986) *Whose Schools? A Radical Manifesto*. London: Claridge Press, p. 7.

⁶⁰ Boyd, *Voice for the Voiceless*, p. 410.

source of power and their standing ability to corrupt the mind and souls of the young'.⁶¹ Intervention and prescription were a justifiable means for Parliament to recover 'the powers of wrongly constituted or abusive bodies', before power is devolved back to the consumer. This argument was echoed by Bob Dunn, who saw the National Curriculum as causing his 'greatest philosophical doubt', but eventually supported its introduction in order to 'break the power of the LEAs'.⁶² Even this was too much for some colleagues. 'Although Caroline Cox asked me to write *The Wayward Curriculum*', recalled Dennis O'Keeffe, 'I reacted with horror to the proposal for a National Curriculum, a socialist monstrosity. You had all the centralisation you needed with the examining boards'.⁶³

These differing perspectives, which were never entirely reconciled, were nonetheless all a very far cry from Keith Joseph's *Better Schools*, published only two years previously. In May 1987, after the publication of the Conservative election manifesto, the *TES* lamented that while the opposition parties struggled to keep pace with Conservative education proposals, their arguments read 'like an intelligent commentary on *Better Schools*. . . only to find that the Tories had got bored with the nuts and bolts of *Better Schools*'.⁶⁴ Baker simply chose to ignore that document's insistence that there not be any direct legislative intervention in to the area of the curriculum.⁶⁵ This would also be accompanied by measures that were meant to restore a market-based vision of education, a voucher system in all but name. As one set of commentators concluded gloomily at the time, the New Right had 'conquered the high ground', and, 'any defence of the old orthodoxies now will be a damage limitation exercise fought on the terms of the New Right'.⁶⁶ The success of the *irregulars* in pushing their agendas to the fore was matched by a government which was so confident of its ability to crush all opposition, that there was no longer any need try to try and create any sort of consensus around the proposals. It was also a government led by a Prime Minister who was prepared to intervene in the detail of education policy to a far greater extent than anything previously experienced.

⁶¹ Hillgate, *Whose Schools*, p. 18.

⁶² Dunn interview.

⁶³ O'Keeffe interview.

⁶⁴ *TES*, 22 May 1987.

⁶⁵ DES (1985) *Better Schools*. London: DES, pp. 11-12.

⁶⁶ Wilby and Midgely, 'As the New Right wields its power'.

The final links

Given the personalised and incestuous nature of contacts and discussions, the contribution of the two individuals, Mrs Thatcher and Brian Griffiths, who, along with Baker himself, loom largest over the period from 1986 to 1988, is necessarily the most difficult to fully assess. Griffiths, former Professor of Banking and International Finance at the City University Business School, became Head of the Policy Unit in the crucial period of late 1985, with education policy as part of his specific remit.⁶⁷ Griffiths' views were clearly on the same wavelength as Mrs Thatcher's. He had long been associated with the IEA, contributing to its *Hobart Papers* series since 1970. His main role appears to have been a filter for all the information and policies now being generated by the various New Right groups. With hindsight, this development almost seems inevitable being, as it was, the culmination of a process of increasing interest and concern shown by Mrs Thatcher in education policy, and her use of the Policy Unit, rather than her Secretary of State, as the main line of communication.

Until 1983, the Policy Unit had taken little or no overt interest in education policy. The first minor intervention came prior to the 1983 general election when the report from the Quality of Education group, chaired by Lord Beloff, was sent to Ferdinand Mount, then Head of the Unit. After the 1983 election, Mrs Thatcher, who was originally dismissive of the notion of advisers within government, changed tactics and began to restructure the Policy Unit to shadow the Whitehall departments. Oliver Letwin was brought in to take responsibility for Education. This move took the *irregulars* a significant step nearer to the heart of the process. Dunn and Sexton, who clearly regarded him as 'the first friend in camp', were now able to funnel ideas directly to Mrs Thatcher.⁶⁸ Letwin's arguments certainly would have played a part in undermining Mrs Thatcher's support for Keith Joseph. Letwin recounts that in 1983 Mrs Thatcher asked Keith Joseph to have regular meetings with Ferdinand

⁶⁷ Sexton now also felt that his direct influence and access was 'not as great as previously'.
Sexton interview.

⁶⁸ Dunn and Sexton interviews.

Mount to discuss the direction of education policy.⁶⁹ Although these meetings were tentative, given Joseph's status within the party, they can be seen as a significant pointer to Mrs Thatcher's increasing willingness to intervene. John Barnes described education policy as 'One of the little rhythms of the first half of the second Thatcher administration. There were frequent memos to Keith Joseph from Mrs Thatcher asking how the voucher thing was coming along'.⁷⁰

What Letwin lacked, at this stage, was sufficient 'clout' with Mrs Thatcher. He was simply another avenue - along with Dunn, Sexton, Cox, the NTBG and others - which Mrs Thatcher used, as was her preferred method of operation, to gather information. It would be Griffiths as Head of the Policy Unit, who would channel the energy and ideas of the various groups and individuals through to Mrs Thatcher. He was the consummate 'back-room boy',⁷¹ to whom Mrs Thatcher, clearly lacking faith in Baker as 'one of us', devolved the responsibility to actually shape the policies into a politically acceptable format. By many accounts, Griffiths directed 'all his influence and energy into achieving change'.⁷² He was responsible for appointing the like-minded Sheila Lawlor as Director of Studies at the CPS, who would be a major thorn in Baker's side. The priority given to education policy at this time can be gauged from Lawlor, who recalled that she was 'given the job to shadow the implementation of education policy and worked extremely closely with Brian Griffiths and Number Ten. I was brought over night after night for hours to discuss with him (Griffiths) papers and proposals coming from the Working Parties and Groups'.⁷³

Such background machinations could not have gone unnoticed by Baker and his relationship with Griffiths must have been uneasy. John Barnes believed that 'Brian Griffiths used His Mistress's Voice to put the fear of God into Baker'.⁷⁴ Cyril Taylor, whom Baker appointed Chair of the City Technology College Trust, recalled that 'I worked closely with Brian Griffiths who had a

⁶⁹ Letwin interview.

⁷⁰ Barnes interview.

⁷¹ Dunn interview.

⁷² Letwin interview. According to Sexton, Griffiths was responsible for organising a number of 'policy meetings' at No. 10 for particular groups during 1986 and 1987. He was also member of the Cabinet Sub-Committee on education, and Lawson records that during 1986-87 the 'Number 10 Policy Group was heavily involved' in formulating education policy with Griffiths 'engaged in little else at this time'. Sexton interview, and Lawson, *View from No. 11*, pp. 610-611.

⁷³ Lawlor interview.

major role in developing some of the policies. This made Kenneth Baker very nervous'.⁷⁵ Baker himself, somewhat unconvincingly, was to describe Griffiths as 'an ally, basically very supportive'.⁷⁶ In his memoirs, Baker wrote that they 'worked very closely together' and rather cryptically added that Griffiths 'helped me in brokering various settlements with Number 10'.⁷⁷ Angela Rumbold's recollection was somewhat different:

Brian Griffiths only cared about two things, the economy and education. He was a nuisance and caused a lot of trouble. We would decide something. Margaret would then run it past Brian who would say the idea was completely mad. Margaret would then come back to us and say "You have gone completely mad because Brian says so", and we were forever having breakfasts with him (Griffiths) to iron out the situation.⁷⁸

However exalted his position, the ultimate influence of Griffiths remained dependent like any adviser, on the closeness of his relationship with his Minister. In Griffiths' case, Mrs Thatcher herself.

As regards what should actually be happening in schools, Mrs Thatcher (as indeed, would be the case with John Major), always seemed to find that the view through the rear-view mirror was clearer than that through the windscreen. Terms such as 'direct grant schools', 'pen and paper tests' and 'the three Rs', all would surface and resurface in Mrs Thatcher's discussions about education. She also carried a torch for the voucher proposal. When other initiatives would appear to be bogged down in detail, or simply too bothersome to get to grips with, she would feel the tug on the thread of her voucher ambitions as a way through the impasse. Each of the above traits were evident in her interventions in education with the added twist that the DES was the only department than she had managed prior to becoming Prime Minister, a not entirely joyful

⁷⁴ Barnes interview.

⁷⁵ Cyril Taylor interview. 18 June 1998.

⁷⁶ Baker interview.

⁷⁷ Baker, *Turbulent Years*, p.169.

⁷⁸ Rumbold interview.

experience.⁷⁹ Her own instincts, as she exhibited in other areas of policy, straddled both the neo-liberal and the neo-conservative positions, tempered with political pragmatism. According to Peter Ridell, Mrs Thatcher's political approach was 'Like that of the Black Papers and many of the subsequent pamphlets produced by the New Right. . . .based on instinct, a series of moral values and an approach...rather than an ideology'.⁸⁰ From such an unsophisticated approach arose much of the intellectual snobbery with which many regarded Mrs Thatcher. David Hancock summarised the contempt of the mandarins, describing her with complete distaste as 'a very simplistic woman'.⁸¹ Yet, as John Hoskyns suggested, 'Decision and action require a certain blindness to nuance'.⁸² They also required, most certainly when dealing with education, an ability to cut through the almost impenetrable in-house jargon of the education establishment.

Mrs Thatcher's preferred method of reaching policy decisions was the device of working with a small group of loyal followers, whether called ad hoc committees or 'bi-lateral' meetings.⁸³ For her, these bodies were not designed to be consultative. They were designed to be 'efficient', something that she now felt was required in education. The evidence from those meetings that dealt with education policy portrays a fierce struggle between the Prime Minister and her Secretary of State. Baker, reminiscing almost like an old soldier, recalled how 'After the election everyone had a view. The Cabinet Committees that I attended were reported to be the liveliest of all. I was bullied remorselessly. They went on and on with endless acrimonious debates'.⁸⁴ Commenting on Nigel Lawson's

⁷⁹ In his memoirs, her Press Secretary Bernard Ingham wrote that 'I do not know what went on in the Department of Education and Science between 1970 and 1974 when the Prime Minister was Secretary of State there. Nor had I the temerity to enquire. Suffice to say that in all my dealings with Mrs Thatcher the premium she puts on loyalty to herself as a Minister harked back to her first Cabinet post in the DES'. Ingham, B. (1991) *Kill the Messenger*. London: HarperCollins, p. 171.

⁸⁰ Ridell, P. (1983) *The Thatcher Government*. Oxford: Martin Robinson, p. 7.

⁸¹ Hancock interview.

⁸² Harrison, B. (1994) 'Mrs Thatcher and the Intellectuals'. *Twentieth Century British History*, Vol. 5, No. 2, p. 224.

⁸³ Kenneth Clarke later recalled that the collection of ministers in such groups 'tended to be a selection of people most likely to agree with the Prime Minister's opinions on the subject...If you turned up at an ad hoc meeting and didn't agree with her, you were not invited to the next meeting on that subject'. Interview with John Barnes in *LSE Magazine*, Vol. 11, No. 2, Winter 1999, pp. 8-10.

⁸⁴ Baker interview.

account of Mrs Thatcher's 'hand bagging' of Baker at these meetings, David Hancock concurred that 'Lawson's description of the Cabinet committee was absolutely right. Lawson, Nicholas Ridley and Mrs Thatcher would tear his submissions to bits, send him away, but he came back and always saying the same thing'.⁸⁵ Arguably these were Baker's finest hours. He displayed tenacity and adroitness, in the face of almost implacable opposition and unsupportive colleagues, to argue for his preferred vision of what should be happening in schools.⁸⁶ Whether he was willing or able to sustain this level of commitment and guile in his dealings with the education establishment was another question.

Conclusion

As the 'little rhythms' of education policy proposals, evident in the early part of the second Thatcher administration, built up to a crescendo after 1986, Mrs Thatcher decided that education policy was much too important to be left in the hands of the DES and its ministers. Choosing to ignore the traditional *regular* or establishment channels as far as practicable, it was the *irregulars* who provided the raft of policy proposals, from which Mrs Thatcher was intent on manipulating through the sub-committee structure of Cabinet, to push through her preferred proposals. Regardless of however congenial and 'efficient' was Mrs Thatcher's preferred strategy, it would not prove to be a terribly efficient or effective manner for establishing a clear and workable rationale for Conservative education policy. A related legacy of this time, also latent under Keith Joseph but patent under Baker, was to be the willingness of Number Ten to intervene in education policy through the conduit of the Policy Unit. This had started in a low key, but systematic, way during Keith Joseph's time. After Baker became

⁸⁵ Hancock interview. Baker's tenacity and political bravery was later attested to by the Cabinet Secretary at the time, Richard Wilson. In discussing his time at the Department of Health and his 'ferocious debates' with Mrs Thatcher, Kenneth Clarke recalled that 'Richard Wilson scored each engagement on the Richter scale for turbulence. But he used to assure me that it was absolutely nothing to the similar discussions that had gone on between Margaret and Ken Baker on education'. Clarke interview with John Barnes in *LSE Magazine*, Vol. 11, No. 2, Winter 1999, p. 11. In his memoirs, Nicholas Ridley, colourfully, if not entirely accurately, wrote of the 'magnificent scenes as she (Thatcher) dragged him (Baker) inch by inch in the direction we all wanted to go'. Ridley, N. (1991) *My Style of Government*. London: Hutchinson, p. 94.

⁸⁶ Even someone as begrudging as John Major had to admit that 'Ken cared a lot about education and in cabinet committee he handled the Prime Minister on the subject better than anyone else I ever saw'. Major, *John Major*, p. 103.

Secretary of State, much of the thinking of the *irregulars* would permeate through to the heart of the Conservative government, through the channel of the Policy Unit. This shifting of the focus of education policy making, if not strictly from the DES and its clients, to Downing Street, then, at the very least, to include Downing Street, would have a significant impact on the course of education policy over the next decade. The very occasional foray into education by previous Prime Ministers would now be replaced by regular intervention, initially by Mrs Thatcher, then by John Major, together with their respective advisers. This would be at both the macro and micro level in education policy, on a scale not experienced before, adding further confusion and uncertainty to the implementation of education policy.

While the evidence for much of this remained in the future, what was needed initially was someone who could sell these new model policies. Baker fitted the bill perfectly, and there is no reason to doubt Mrs Thatcher's own explanation as to why he was appointed to succeed Keith Joseph. Did this make him simply a cipher for decisions taken elsewhere? Such an argument tends to underestimate the room for manoeuvre that Baker had, or was able to manufacture for himself, and also the personal imprint that he was able to leave on the subsequent legislation. The optimistic, if mistaken, view, of many of the *irregulars* on Baker's appointment was summed up by John Barnes:

We saw Kenneth Baker as a very different creature to Keith Joseph. He didn't know anything about education. All Mrs Thatcher wanted was a bloody good publicist. We had some hope that something might happen as Baker, unlike Keith Joseph, was someone who owed everything to Mrs Thatcher. He was "leanable on" if she wanted to.⁸⁷

The irony, of course, would prove to be that while his colleagues were aware of, and happy to harness, Baker's unquestionable political and presentational skills for their own ends, they never seemed to have anticipated his capacity to use these skills for his own ends. As regards the 1987 manifesto proposals and the subsequent 1988 Act, one could not but admire the artifice, but the unforeseen

⁸⁷ Barnes interview.

consequence of this was the instability of the edifice, whose construction Baker so deftly supervised. With versions of many of the policy proposals that had publicly appeared on the education agenda over the previous decade included in the Education Act, Baker's 'dash for glory' contained intimations of salvation for all of those pushing for education reform, whether *regulars*, *irregulars* or *politicos*. What Baker did not do, and perhaps for his own political and personal reasons did not attempt to do, was to bring coherence to the direction of policy, a guiding voice. The 1988 Act codified these differences in approach to education policy without resolving them. The consequences of such obfuscation were to be felt when the proposals had to be turned into practicalities.

CHAPTER 6

May 1986 – July 1989: *Unforeseen ways*

Introduction

Following the 1987 election, consultation papers covering the main proposals for the new Bill appeared before the end of July, with responses required two months later. The overwhelming majority of responses were critical. Baker ploughed on regardless. With only minor amendments made as it passed through Parliament, the Bill gained Royal assent on July 29 1988.¹ For many of the *irregulars*, since Baker's succession, it appeared to have been a confident advance on all fronts. CTCs, Grant Maintained schools, Local Management of Schools, and the introduction of a national curriculum all appeared to herald a radical change in the direction of education policy. The 'leanable' Baker may not have entirely convinced as a born again enthusiast for market forces, but he certainly displayed the expected political nous, albeit backed by a substantial Parliamentary majority, to push through the raft of policy proposals that had been gestating on the right for at least the previous decade. This 'victory' would, however, prove to be somewhat hollow, with the subsequent development of both the National Curriculum and the Grant Maintained schools policy in particular, quickly subject to charges of 'subversion' and sabotage by the 'education establishment'. This chapter examines why, unlike the earlier stages of the policy process, Mrs Thatcher and her *irregular* allies were unable to exert greater control over how the policies developed. Was there was an equal and opposite cabal within the *regulars*, who had been shut out from the high politics of the reform proposals, but who found their opportunity when it became necessary to define how these policies would be put into practice? How much credence can be given to the charges of 'subversion'?

¹ With little pretence that much consideration was given to the multitude of objections raised, Angela Rumbold, Schools Minister at the DES, decried any such course in typically combative fashion. 'Ever since the first documents were issued', she told the House of Commons, 'the

CTCs – beleaguered beacons

In 1982, Keith Joseph, on the back of a suggestion from David Young, then head of the MSC, had toyed with the idea of establishing a new group of technical colleges. As well as addressing a particular aspect of English education that had long been neglected, Joseph also suggested that these new schools would be ‘a new type of provider’. They would be called ‘Crown Colleges’, and would be ‘the direct agent of a Crown body’.² While this proposal appears to have become submerged in the subsequent Technical and Vocational Education Initiative (TVEI), following a conference at the CPS in 1985 on the topic of employment, Cyril Taylor published a report which called for ‘the setting up of one hundred technical secondary schools funded by central government on a direct grant basis to address the crucial need to improve training and vocational education’.³

According to Taylor, ‘The 1985 conference was attended by Mrs Thatcher and David Young and Mrs Thatcher subsequently wrote to me saying how interested she was in the idea’.⁴ Within the DES, Bob Dunn had also raised the issue in a paper prepared for Keith Joseph who typically ‘after a long debate decided not to proceed with it’. After Baker was appointed, Dunn thought, ‘Let’s try this idea again, dusted it off, updated it slightly’.⁵

cohort of the education establishment and its camp followers have been gnawing away at the Bill...like rats in a cellar’. *Hansard*, House of Commons, vol. 130, col. 828, 28 March 1988.

² Franklin, ‘The MSC, the DES and the origins of the TVEI’, p. 267. The memo quoted by Franklin was written by Keith Joseph in 1982. It is interesting to note how ideas can mutate over time. Young’s original idea for technical schools, is first adapted by Keith Joseph into ‘Crown schools’, which then surface publicly in 1986 with a report in the *TES* that Chris Patten and Walter Ulrich had put forward a plan to establish a network of government-controlled direct grant ‘Crown’ schools in inner city areas, whose purpose was reportedly ‘to head off Conservative right wing pressure to introduce a voucher system for schools’. *TES*, 4 April 1986.

³ Taylor, C. (1986) *Employment Examined: the Right approach to more jobs*. London: Centre for Policy Studies.

⁴ Taylor interview.

⁵ Dunn interviewed in Whitty, G., Edwards, T. and Gewirtz, S. (1993) *Specialisation and Choice in Urban Education. The City Technology College Experiment*. London: Routledge, p. 21.

So, into Baker's lap fell a germ of an idea for some kind of specialised technical school, which he was to make very much his own.⁶ The proposal that eventually emerged was for the establishment of City Technology Colleges. These would be the first in the long line of Baker's policy proposals and their concept was probably the one with the greatest degree of originality, or at least an original synthesis, on Baker's part. The beauty of the CTCs was that they merged a number of different existing, as well as emergent, policy strands with the Conservative Party's approach to education. The new schools would be independent of LEAs, attract private sponsorship, have a technological/technically based curriculum to redress the skills gap for British industry, and be part-selective. Apart from some kind of voucher element, it had just about all the 'little messages' rolled into one.

City Technology Colleges: A New Choice of School was the title of the Green Paper which officially launched the CTCs. DES documents had not looked like this before.⁷ *Education* described 'the glossy brochure and sleek presentation' as 'pure Baker'.⁸ Yet, from the first day of their launch, the original ambitions for the CTC programme were in trouble, not least because Baker announced them in his speech at the Conservative Party conference in 1986. While the normally nimble Baker worked hard to reconcile all the political and policy options, not even he could reconcile all of them all of the time. There may have been a political imperative, both in terms of personal ambition and in staking out new Party policy for the forthcoming election, but these clashed with the need for the necessary groundwork to help such a new initiative on its way. Baker wrote that his officials had been 'adamantly opposed to my announcing the CTC network at the Party conference and predicted that to do this would so

⁶ Baker himself said that on being appointed 'you could not say they (ideas about technical schools) had been worked up in any shape or form to any degree'. Ibid., p. 19.

⁷ Baker had what could almost be described a dry run for the launch during his time at the Department of Environment during the early 1980s and his role in the early development of the Poll Tax. *Paying for Local Government* was the Green Paper he produced then. It was described as, 'quite unlike any Green Paper that had gone before. Whereas government consultation documents had hitherto been dense and drab, not least those concerning local government finance, this one was racy and colourful. It came in large A4 format, with bright, glitzy graphs, pie-charts, and tables. Kenneth Baker's presentational hand was on every page'. Butler, D., Adonis, A. and Travers, T. (1994) *Failure in British Government. The Politics of the Poll Tax*. Oxford University Press, p. 89.

⁸ *Education*, 17 October 1986.

politicize the policy'.⁹ It was not just his officials who were wary of Baker's tactics. Bob Balchin was among a coterie of *irregular* advisers who applauded the principle of the new CTCs, yet were also uneasy. 'We thought CTCs might be the answer to all our prayers', said Balchin, 'but the way they were "born" was a tremendous error. It brought huge opposition from the LEAs and the education establishment. They were far too highly politicised, too much so to attract private sponsors'.¹⁰ Although he had used the term 'beacon' in his own pamphlet, given the highly-politicised context in which the CTCs were launched, Cyril Taylor, when interviewed for this research, said 'I never liked the term. "Beacon" was a dangerous word. Did it imply everybody else was in the dark?'¹¹ Taylor believed that the notion of private sponsorship for the new schools was 'Kenneth Baker's crucial input',¹² but he (Baker) 'had taken a flier in announcing the CTCs. The announcement at the Party conference was a mistake and provoked too much adverse comment. The great bugbear turned out to be one wretched sentence about capital costs'.¹³

Although, at the time, Baker told one interviewer of a 'very strong response from industry' and hinted at a queue of eager backers waiting in the wings, these failed to materialise. Nor were local authorities very co-operative in providing sites for the new schools, which also greatly increased the capital costs of any building programme.¹⁴ Enthusiasm within the DES for such structural changes within the schools system was also lacking. In his memoirs, Baker recalled that when the initiative was being developed, his own adviser, Tony Kerpel, complained that 'DES officials were hijacking the CTC initiative and

⁹ Baker, *Turbulent Years*, p. 180.

¹⁰ Robert Balchin interview, 28 July 1998.

¹¹ Taylor interview.

¹² Whitty et al., *Specialisation and Choice in Urban Education*, p. 21.

¹³ Taylor interview.

¹⁴ Whitty et al., *Specialisation and Choice in Urban Education*, p. 38. According to the authors there was no evidence of any consultation with relevant interests groups such as the CBI, the Industrial Society or the Engineering Council. Nor had there been consultation with major companies, like ICI and BP, already actively involved in 'partnership' arrangements with schools. *Ibid.*, pp. 38-41.

imposing their version, which simply represented a rehash of the very comprehensive schools we felt had failed'.¹⁵

Given the relatively small scale of the CTC initiative, these schools were never going to be more than a side-show, albeit with important 'messages' for possible future policy directions. A greater concern was the lack of clarity in developing the policy, the character of Baker himself, and his temperamental inability or unwillingness to get to grips with the 'nuts and bolts' of what he was proposing. The corner cutting and negligence that beset the introduction of CTCs provided an inauspicious start to the construction of what would become the 1988 Education Act. The most succinct description of this was provided by Baker's Permanent Secretary, David Hancock, and his view of the CTC initiative. 'The CTCs were a great wheeze', said Hancock, 'but he (Baker) got ahead of himself. Typical of the man'.¹⁶ The drawbacks of Baker's *modus operandi* were to be thrown into an even starker light with the biggest 'wheeze' of all, the National Curriculum.

The National Curriculum - 'The creation of a new enterprise'

In terms of their impact on schools, the National Curriculum and its attendant testing regime would prove to be the centrepiece of the 1988 Education Act. These two features would also directly curtail the careers of both John MacGregor and John Patten. Yet Baker's singular achievement was actually getting anything on the statute book related to a national curriculum, given the experience of previous Secretaries of State for Education. According to one Deputy Secretary at the DES, 'Without the political clout and chutzpah of Kenneth Baker it would have taken at least another five years, if at all, for the appearance of a national curriculum'.¹⁷ On the plus side, Baker certainly had the advantage of surprise. The last major document issued by his Department, *Better*

¹⁵ Baker, *Turbulent Years*, p. 180. When he was later appointed as chair of the CTC Trust, Cyril Taylor described how 'The Civil Servants wanted the CTC Trust located in the Department and were willing to provide an office. I spent a half day there and appeared to have stirred up "the forces of darkness". They (the Civil Servants) loathed the idea of advisers coming in and having the ear of the Minister'. Taylor interview.

¹⁶ Hancock interview.

¹⁷ John Hedger interview. 18 February 1999.

Schools, had categorically stated that ‘The Government does not propose to introduce legislation affecting the powers of the Secretaries of State in relation to the curriculum’.¹⁸ The education establishment had every reason to feel safe from direct intervention during Keith Joseph’s period of office. According to his Permanent Secretary, ‘Keith Joseph wouldn’t have touched the National Curriculum and during this period we seemed to be issuing endless guidance’.¹⁹ The problem was, in the words of Denis Lawton, ‘Keith Joseph in a way lulled people into a false sense of security in that he would never have agreed to a national curriculum, and when proposals came out there was a feeling that it would never happen here’.²⁰ This was despite the almost whiggish inevitability of a move towards a national curriculum since 1976, and based on the reasonably objective evidence from the series of HMI reports which pointed to the need for more central direction.

However much Baker may, or may not, have been aware, he had arrived in the Department at the critical juncture of a journey that began publicly with the Ruskin speech a decade previously. All the talking and exhorting had been exhausted. It was decision time, something his officials were certainly aware of. ‘What Keith Joseph left’, said David Hancock,

was a thorough analysis of the problem and the Sheffield speech was the culmination of his time at the Department. *Better Schools*, which Keith Joseph went through line by line, was really a professional analysis on the results of the inspection regime. Kenneth Baker concluded after reading *Better Schools* that things couldn’t go on like this.²¹

Eric Bolton, HMCI, who had two years previously written of the ‘unstoppable momentum’²² towards a common core curriculum, was of the same opinion.

‘After starting, Kenneth Baker couldn’t duck a decision’, recalled Bolton, ‘All

¹⁸ DES (1985) *Better Schools*. London: DES, pp. 11-12.

¹⁹ Hancock interview.

²⁰ Lawton interview.

²¹ Hancock interview. The ‘Sheffield speech’ was Keith Joseph’s address to the North of England Conference in January 1984.

²² *TES*, 8 March 1985.

the analysis had been done. Either the government then shut up about it or it had to legislate. There was huge pressure not to. Baker asked me whether everybody would follow the guidelines. I told him “No”.”²³

Despite his ‘soundings’ over the state of education while at the Department of the Environment, Baker was surprised to discover that the notion of a national curriculum was well advanced. Indeed, he later recalled how surprised he was ‘to discover that the Department and HMI were in favour of a national curriculum’.²⁴ One can well imagine that this was welcome news to the ambitious new Secretary of State, anxious to leave his mark with a major piece of legislation. Yet there is evidence that Baker, on examining the evidence, was also motivated by a genuine desire to do something about the chaotic school curriculum. John Clare felt that ‘He (Baker) certainly developed the National Curriculum beyond what was given. He was genuinely appalled by what children were being taught and the gaping holes in their school experience’.²⁵ Baker himself would return regularly to this theme, highlighting in particular the failure of the LEAs to exert any unifying hand over what was being taught in schools. ‘Different parts of the country almost had a foreign education world’, he later recalled, ‘LEAs had been empire building while standards were declining. Although they (LEAs) were arguing that they knew what to do, there was no evidence that they did’.²⁶ When giving evidence to the Education, Arts and Science Committee in 1988, David Hancock alluded to this failure on the part of LEAs, when asked about whether power was shifting to the centre. ‘There will be a very significant change’, said Hancock, ‘In the case of other LEAs who have not been very active in these matters it will be the creation of a new enterprise’.²⁷

A further push in the direction of a national curriculum, was, ironically, a legacy of Keith Joseph, and his willingness to open up and publicise comparisons

²³ Bolton interview.

²⁴ Baker interview.

²⁵ Clare interview. Michael Fallon also said that both Margaret Thatcher and Kenneth Baker ‘were struck by how you could go through the state system without really doing anything concrete, such as a Science or a Language’. Fallon interview.

²⁶ Baker interview.

²⁷ Lawrence, *Power and Politics*, pp. 118-19.

between the English and international schools systems.²⁸ Influential examples included the prominence given to Prais and Wagner's unfavourable comparison of mathematics standards in English and West German schools, published in 1983.²⁹ Further West German influence on the curriculum could be seen as comparisons surfaced once more in a HMI report on the West German schools system, that had been commissioned in 1984.³⁰ Baker later admitted that 'the HMI report on Germany was very important'.³¹ David Hancock also recalled how 'the National Curriculum was very influenced by the German system although this was not much talked about at the time'.³²

Once Baker announced his decision to introduce a national curriculum, the big question was what shape it would take and it was here that the Secretary of State was able to impose his personal vision of what a national curriculum should resemble. There were at least three possible models from which he could have chosen, each with their own advocates. The first was a minimalist core curriculum approach that concentrated on the three main subjects, English, mathematics and science. Despite being the favoured model of his political mistress and the majority of her *irregular* advisers, the Renaissance Man would have none of it. 'She believed basically that all one needed in the National Curriculum was English, mathematics and science', Baker later recalled, 'It was

²⁸ When he was appointed to the Department of Industry in 1979 Joseph had famously presented his officials with a comprehensive reading list. During his first meeting with Civil Servants on being appointed to the DES in 1981, he recommended only a single volume, one that he himself had commissioned, Wilkinson, M. (1977) *Lessons from Europe: A Comparison of British and West European Schooling*. London: Centre for Policy Studies.

²⁹ Prais, S. and Wagner, K. (1983) *Schooling Standards in Britain and Germany*. London: NIESR. Stuart Maclure has suggested that the importance of the Prais and Wagner's report was that it moved the argument away from comparisons over time to comparisons of schools with those of other countries. Prais' explanations for the differences of performance between English and West German schools were the latter's 'clearly defined, more sharply focused, programmes of study and fewer teacher led variations from school to school and area to area'. Maclure, S. (1988) *Education Re-formed*. London: Hodder, pp. 174-75.

³⁰ HMI (1986) *Education in the Federal Republic of Germany. Aspects of Curriculum and Assessment*, London: HMSO, p. 34. The report noted that in West Germany there was 'wide agreement about education and its assessment (is) in itself an important message for English education where such agreement, undertaking and trust are lacking'. The report also contained what Eric Bolton described as other 'sharp messages', including its comment on the curriculum where it was noted that 'the imposed breath of they curriculum is attractive to English eyes used to the narrowness of out A-level studies'. Bolton interview, HMI, *Education in the Federal Republic of Germany*, p. 36.

³¹ Baker interview.

³² Hancock interview.

a sort of a gradgrind curriculum in my view, not a rounded one'.³³ The Dickensian allusion was particularly apt for a man of Baker's tastes. According to Jenny Bacon

Baker as an educator has to be set against Margaret Thatcher and the core curriculum. What Baker did was to in effect say. . ."I do want certain things which I, Baker, value, like a proper approach to history – kings and queens of England and English history – an intense nationalistic patriotic (view). I want poetry, I want literature, I want kids to enjoy learning English".³⁴

Bacon's catalogue of Baker's curriculum preferences also provide one indication of why the second alternative, the HMI preferred 'areas of experience' / cross-curricular themes approach, was also dismissed. But there were factors, other than personal preference, that were pushing Baker toward a more straightforward, traditional and DES-preferred subject-based approach. There was, of course, the advice of Baker's senior officials within the DES and the administrative preference for something concrete, neatly packaged. This was not necessarily just from a straightforward bureaucratic point of view. There were also the implications for how the legislation was to be drafted. Baker recalled that 'the amount of detail that was in the Bill meant that it was like writing a constitution from scratch and the parliamentary draughtsmen had an important role'.³⁵ Eric Bolton also described the importance of 'operational factors operating in the National Curriculum. . .the influence of the parliamentary draughtsmen and the need to be legally unambiguous. They couldn't conceive of "Humanities" or "European Studies"'.³⁶ A further, more compelling argument was provided by the work of HMI itself. Weighing up the possibility of actually delivering an 'areas of experience' type curriculum in the classroom, according to Bolton, the evidence in HMI's own reports since 1976 proved that the quality

³³ 'Why are you still smiling Kenneth?' *TES*, 31 May 1996.

³⁴ Quoted in Taylor, 'Movers and shakers', p. 171. Bacon is referred to as 'Stiles' in the article. Bacon interview.

³⁵ Baker interview.

³⁶ Bolton interview.

of teaching was ‘the joker in the pack’.³⁷ The conclusion of officials within the DES was provided by Jenny Bacon: ‘The quality of teaching simply wasn’t good enough to deliver on the “areas of experience” and the ten-subject National Curriculum was the policy side of the Department asserting itself over the HMI’.³⁸

While Eric Bolton felt that, as a body, ‘HMI couldn’t stop the DES’³⁹ in imposing what was seen as its preferred version of the National Curriculum, the advice of Bolton himself also appears to have been influential in reinforcing Baker’s preference for a subject-led curriculum. Baker was later to pay particular tribute to Bolton, saying how ‘I had a great deal of help from him’.⁴⁰ Denis Lawton, who subsequently got to know the ex-HMCI as a colleague at the Institute of Education, detected Bolton’s influence in the decision to go for a subject-based curriculum:

Baker’s heart was in the right place but he didn’t know enough about how to do it. “Areas of experience” might have worked. There were some positive soundings from the pilot areas but it would have taken time and money. Baker relied too much on Eric Bolton who was not one of the most informed people in the Inspectorate about curriculum planning. His views on the curriculum were very traditional, very much in terms of lists of subjects. He was not a curriculum thinker. Bolton and Baker shared what could be called a “common sense” view of the curriculum.⁴¹

Notwithstanding what the ‘positive soundings’ actually were or meant, an endless quadrille in devising a new curriculum was not on Baker’s own political agenda, or within his timeframe. According to David Hancock, ‘Baker was very keen that the effects would be apparent before the following elections, within five years. He was playing the political long game’.⁴² Even if Baker had been

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Bacon interview.

³⁹ Bolton interview.

⁴⁰ ‘Why are you still smiling Kenneth’. *TES*, 31 May 1996.

⁴¹ Lawton interview.

⁴² Hancock interview.

sympathetic towards the HMI approach to the curriculum, he certainly would not have been able to convince Mrs Thatcher and her advisers regarding ‘areas of experience’. According to Bacon,

Mrs Thatcher was being influenced by fundamentalist American thinking, *reductio ad absurdum*. Kenneth Baker was convinced that this was highly undesirable. The ten-subject approach was also to appease Mrs Thatcher. A compromise between Mrs Thatcher’s minimalism and the HMI wishy-washy approach, while also getting something broader with meat on it.⁴³

David Hancock concurred that this had been Baker’s strategy. ‘Kenneth Baker was very tenacious and handled Mrs Thatcher very skilfully’, recalled Hancock. ‘He disagreed profoundly with her on many things, most importantly on the nature of the curriculum. Baker was absolutely determined to have a broad and balanced curriculum and he had to placate her on this’.⁴⁴ Baker’s tenacity in sticking with his preferred vision, was matched only by his disingenuity over his ten-subject ‘compromise’ curriculum. He had managed temporarily to placate Mrs Thatcher on the basis that the ten subjects would be divided, or prioritised, into a ‘core’ of English, mathematics and science, followed by the remainder ‘foundation’ subjects. This was not what was to happen. According to David Hancock:

We devised the notion of the core and the foundation subjects but if you examine the Act you will see that there is no difference between the two. This was a totally cynical and deliberate manoeuvre on Kenneth Baker’s part.⁴⁵

So, in the end, Baker would get his broad and balanced curriculum included in the Act, but at a cost to both him and his successors. Suspecting that the education establishment had once again pulled a fast one, Mrs Thatcher and her

⁴³ Bacon interview.

⁴⁴ Hancock interview.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

advisers sought to impose themselves on the future direction of the reforms through incessant intervention. So began a game of second-guessing and political manoeuvring, led by the right and from which Baker and his successors and everyone else at the sharp end of curriculum reform would suffer.

In his 'dash for glory', Baker had also earned the enmity of much of the education establishment. Once he had personally made the decision to go for a national curriculum, it did not appear that he had learned anything from his haste to announce CTCs. Following the election, one of his officials asked him, in what must have been a rather plaintive tone, 'Are you going to consult with anybody before you introduce the legislation?' "Oh", he said, "I never thought." So between June and August we wrote seven (consultation documents), I think'.⁴⁶ This was a very different approach compared to previous 'inclusive' efforts at policy making. The 'loop' was constrictingly tight. One academic recalled that 'HMI were telling me at the time that they had been completely ignored in this, that the consultation paper on the National Curriculum had been produced literally overnight by a senior civil servant...most people knew at the time her name was Bacon'.⁴⁷ There were predictable expressions of indignation from the education establishment whose disposition towards the government was not helped by the fact that the person who had a major role in defending the most contentious aspects of the Reform Bill, including the National Curriculum was the Schools Minister, Angela Rumbold.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Taylor, 'Mover and Shakers', p. 174.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 174. Bacon remained gleefully unrepentant about her role: 'I went in there and produced the kind of brief that (had) been produced at the MSC... we were used to mucking around with what it was they ought to teach and train...(it was) written in English but it was "ball points"...some snappy things with headings. It wasn't glorious, continuous prose with half of it in Greek. Walter (Ulrich) was appalled by this but Baker said "That's just the kind of brief I want."' Ibid., p. 183.

⁴⁸ A typically bruising encounter between Rumbold and the educationists was at a conference organised by the Schools Curriculum Development Committee on 'aspects of curriculum change'. The editor of the conference papers wrote that 'There can seldom have been an educational conference at which intellectual debate was so heightened by genuine anger and even bewilderment at the pace, direction and sheer clumsiness of the political process'. Rumbold's speech, which was fairly measured by her own standards, was met by a response that was described as 'immediate and spirited', something about which her officials had warned her: 'I was writing a speech for the conference and Jenny Bacon kept taking passages out of it, saying, "That won't go down very well minister," and I kept putting them back in and insisted on writing the final draft. At the conference after I started speaking the audience turned their chairs away and started to read their papers in protest. I met Jenny Bacon after coming off the stage who said to me very sweetly, "That was brave of you indeed minister"'. Rumbold interview, and

Although knowledgeable about education through her former role as chairman of the Committee of Local Education Authorities, Rumbold's political background made her officials initially very wary of her. 'On my first day', she recalled, 'I was received with coolness and silence. (David) Hancock presented me with a history of the Department and a note on how it all worked'.⁴⁹ As a former member of the right-wing 92 Club, PPS to Nicholas Ridley, and a member of the No Turning Back Group, Rumbold was not entirely incorrectly perceived as Mrs Thatcher's 'minder' for Baker within the DES.⁵⁰ 'I was very hesitant about the National Curriculum', recalled Rumbold, 'It went against all our philosophy and I felt that the core curriculum was as far as you needed to go. Mrs Thatcher used to berate Kenneth Baker, calling it (the National Curriculum) "socialist interventionism"'.⁵¹ The proposals for a national curriculum that Rumbold had to defend highlighted what was the mix of 'alliances' that had come into play over its introduction. There were some *politicos* and senior level *regular* advisers supporting one model – the ten subject model - while the majority of the education establishment and other *politicos* and *irregular* advisers found common cause in opposing that model, but without agreeing on an alternative. This mix would be shuffled again, with the second and arguably even more contentious phase of introducing the National Curriculum, that of deciding what was to be taught within each subject area and how it was to be assessed. Responsibility for presenting these proposals to ministers was to be given over to two new bodies, the National Curriculum Council (NCC) and the Schools Examinations and Assessment Council (SEAC).

The National Curriculum Council – that 'unhappy body'

It was during the process of putting flesh onto the bones of the National Curriculum and its assessment that Baker in effect relinquished control over this

O'Connor, M. (ed.) (1987) *Curriculum at the Crossroads: an account of the SCDC national conference on aspects of curriculum change*. London: School Curriculum Development Committee, p. 45.

⁴⁹ Rumbold interview.

⁵⁰ According to Rumbold, Mrs Thatcher had told her 'to go in there and make damn sure we get our changes through'. Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

aspect of the education reforms. While Mrs Thatcher may not have wanted the National Curriculum in the first place, if she had to have it, she certainly did not want anyone from the education establishment to have anything to do with drawing it up. Baker was also worried, but his anxieties centred on whether the subject content would be sufficiently rigorous. Baker further diverged from Mrs Thatcher in that he was prepared, if only for the reason that there appeared little viable alternative, to reach back into the education policy community to access the professional expertise needed to 'write' the actual curriculum. The input of the professionals was to be channelled through two new bodies created by the 1988 Act, described by Baker as 'the twin guardians of the curriculum', the NCC and SEAC.

In his memoirs, Baker wrote that the members of each of the National Curriculum working groups were appointed 'in order to balance the various strands of thinking in each subject, as I wanted to gain as great a degree of consensus as possible'.⁵² The problems with any such apparently sensible approach were manifold. From a party political point of view, it was almost beyond belief. 'The Civil Servants just took control', recalled Angela Rumbold:

They would present list after list of possible appointees, mostly left-wing teachers. If someone not on the list was suggested they would attack asking what credentials had he or she and do they know about this and do they know about that?⁵³

Even Baker's special adviser, whose primary loyalty was always personal rather than political, balked when he saw the names of some of the people proposed for the NCC and SEAC. 'I asked Kenneth Baker why are we turning to these people', recalled Kerpel, 'who are the very ones responsible for the failures we have been trying to put right?'⁵⁴ Baker's over leavening of the NCC and the

⁵² Baker, *Turbulent Years*, p. 202. Baker's evidence to a Commons Committee had a slightly different emphasis in that he had wanted 'to involve professionals in the education system in shaping the National Curriculum' and that he had 'taken advice from the inspectors and others to ensure that wherever possible we draw on the best brains in the country'. *Hansard*, House of Commons, Col. 255. 17 December 1987.

⁵³ Rumbold interview.

⁵⁴ Kerpel interview.

subject groups with professionals saddled all of his Conservative successors with a knotty legacy, which none of them ever quite managed to untangle. This political misjudgement was primarily the result of a personal misjudgement. Baker was far too sanguine over the potential pitfalls of producing the various subject documents, assuming that the content might be relatively uncontroversial. It wasn't long before he realised that content was not as straightforward as had been supposed. 'I thought you could produce a curriculum without bloodshed', Baker recalled rather disconsolately a decade later, 'Then people marched over mathematics. Great armies were assembled over the ways of teaching algebra. Two reports were produced about English and could have been written about different things'.⁵⁵

These ongoing problems were further compounded by conflict between the NCC and the DES, highlighted by the clash between Duncan Graham, the first chairman of the NCC, and Nick Stuart, who was the self-appointed departmental 'assessor' to the NCC and also to SEAC. One commentator described the relationship between the two men as 'hate at first sight'.⁵⁶ According to Graham, Baker originally intended the Council to have a more distinctly partisan role, providing 'a source of professional advice to balance against that of officials from the Department of Education and Science'.⁵⁷ Such a development was something that senior officials in the DES were not about to tolerate. Graham's account of the arrogant and 'dictatorial manner' of DES officials is borne out by the recollection of Nick Tate, then the Professional Officer for History at the NCC. 'When I joined there was a sense of great excitement', recalled Tate, 'It was to be a great adventure, a great opportunity. (But) it was soon very obvious that the Civil Servants were very anxious about the NCC but the big culture shock was at the way the Civil Servants operated'.⁵⁸ Graham's indignation at the behaviour of Civil Servants carries slightly less weight when the management of his own staff is examined. One employee

⁵⁵ Baker interview. One official described how 'The education world is full of people with staring eyes who will tell you that they are the sole proprietors of the "right" answer and totally refuse to compromise'. Owen interview.

⁵⁶ 'How King Graham bit the carpet', *Education*, 19 July 1991.

⁵⁷ Graham with Tytler, *Lesson for Us All*, p. 12.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, p. 15 and Nick Tate interview, 25 February 2000.

described the NCC as ‘run on fear. People were terrified of him. They were constantly being bawled out and would find abusive comments written on submissions’.⁵⁹ ‘Duncan Graham’s account needs to be taken with a pinch of salt’, was the opinion of one DES official, ‘He was a terrible manager of staff, terrible, a swine to work for’.⁶⁰

Rather than personal antagonisms or other alleged misdemeanours, it was professional misjudgements over the role that Graham wanted the NCC to have, or to develop, that caused the greatest friction.⁶¹ Nick Tate described the Council as ‘full of political innocents with limited experience’ and at the apex of this was the chairman who ‘was inexperienced in handling Ministers’.⁶² In Eric Bolton’s description,

The NCC was not a happy body. It had a clear remit. Its job was finite and unlike SEAC, it could end. This presented a very real difficulty with the Department and Ministers over planning and budgets. This was personified by the clash between Nick Stuart and Duncan Graham. There was a huge clash on the budget. The NCC still wanted to carry out its own research but Ministers wouldn’t give a blank cheque and the Department assessor (Stuart) would not let large-scale projects develop.⁶³

Even worse was that the ‘large-scale projects’ that Graham initially wanted to develop included nothing other than the ‘whole curriculum’. Part of the problem was that Graham, frustrated at how limited his influence was over the main work of the NCC, sought to carve out his own niche. According to Jenny Bacon, ‘Duncan Graham was not in charge of the groups which were set up by the Department so he set up his own shadow groups. He was soon in deep trouble as

⁵⁹ Unattributed interview material. A flavour of Graham’s lack of tact can be gleaned from his off-colour comment to one researcher that ‘LEAs were picked on by Margaret Thatcher in a way like Hitler picked on the Jews’. Davies-Griffith, ‘Developments in the making of policy in education in the twentieth century’, p. 182.

⁶⁰ Unattributed interview material.

⁶¹ There was the infamous fracas over the cost of the carpet for the new NCC headquarters in York, and, as described in one profile, ‘journeys to the United States with his former secretary, residential weekends and the purchase of chauffeur driven cars’. ‘How King Graham bit the carpet’, *Education*, 19 July 1991.

⁶² Tate interview.

his people were more keen on areas of experience and a wishy-washy curriculum'.⁶⁴ Graham soon established a Whole Curriculum Committee and proposed to set up working groups to deal with the five themes of citizenship, environment, economic and industrial understanding, careers and health, with the intention that each group would publish non-statutory guidance for schools in each area.⁶⁵ This was a misjudgement of the highest order given the fact that this battle had only so recently been fought and lost at the most senior level. When the NCC's first annual report was published in late September 1989, an interim report on the progress of cross-curricular issues had still not been made public and the *TES* reported a 'tense battle' between the NCC and DES Civil Servants over its publication.⁶⁶ Not long afterwards, according to Graham, 'the roof fell in', with 'a posse of Civil Servants' descending with strict instructions, in a letter apparently from Baker himself, that 'nothing should go to formal meetings of the council for approval until it had been seen and approved by the Secretary of State'.⁶⁷

Conflict between senior officials within the NCC and the DES was simply one manifestation of other problems that were beginning to accrue in the implementation of the 'new enterprise'. These were conspicuous and operated at many levels. The most gaping problem was the simple mathematical impossibility of fitting all ten subjects into the existing school timetable structure up to GCSE.⁶⁸ While this conundrum did not have to be faced until the National

⁶³ Bolton interview.

⁶⁴ Bacon interview. One of 'his people' was Martin Davis, Director of the NCC who had been Director of Education in Newcastle. Following the publication of the National Curriculum Consultation Document in 1987, Davis' 'major criticisms of these proposals (were) that they are subject based many years after HMI had identified areas of experience as a more valid way of designing the curriculum...the government's proposals ...do not adequately address the problem of tackling the increasing number of cross curricular issues...'. Marshland and Seaton, *The Empire Strikes Back*, p. 4.

⁶⁵ Graham with Tytler, *Lesson for Us All*, pp. 19-20.

⁶⁶ *TES*, 29 September 1989.

⁶⁷ Graham with Tytler, *Lesson for Us All*, p. 20. Although Graham later thought he had Baker's support on the issue when they met in an almost surreal encounter, in a field in Wales with the Secretary of State dressed in running gear, the letter was never withdrawn and Graham would never manage to impose his vision or improve his standing with the officials and the politicians. *Ibid.*, pp. 21-22.

⁶⁸ If the subject professionals may not have been that keen on the subject-based concept of a National Curriculum, once it became a fact, they all certainly warmed to the idea. The historian, Robert Skidelsky, from the libertarian right, perfectly captured how subject specialists, regardless of their political or ideological persuasion, wanted their specialism to have its place in the sun:

Curriculum had worked its way through the earlier years of secondary schooling, of more immediate concern was how individual reports would spark off clashes between the 'progressive' education professionals and their 'traditional' opponents. The place of grammar in English, calculators in mathematics, and 'facts' in history were particular flash points, with the Prime Minister and her advisers taking a close interest.⁶⁹ Another concern was the sheer unwieldiness of the proposals that the working groups were delivering. When Graham himself had joined the mathematics working party before being offered the top job at the NCC, the interim report had contained 'a mere 354 attainment targets'. After replacing the original chairman of the group, during the course of one meeting Graham and a reconstituted working party 'had whittled them down to a manageable 14'.⁷⁰

Just as Baker had abrogated responsibility to his officials, so his officials by and large were content to allow the working parties their head, with a nonchalance and connivance among both politicians and officials about what was happening. John Hedger, then an Under Secretary at the DES, neatly summed up where and why the process was going off the rails:

We (officials and Ministers) did not impose ourselves sufficiently on the subject groups to distinguish the platonic idea of a national curriculum and what the professional, the person at the chalk face, could actually deliver.⁷¹

If this was already becoming apparent with the subject content of the National Curriculum, it was as nothing as to what was brewing over the second 'guardian' body, the Schools Examination and Assessment Council, SEAC.

'A minimum prescription is in the national interest. It is in the national interest that people are literate and numerate. And as a personal belief, I would also favour that they know of British history. I would privilege History in that respect vis-à-vis the libertarian argument'. Robert Skidelsky interview, 10 November 1998.

⁶⁹ Graham recorded how a civil servant passed on to him an example of 'Mrs. Thatcher's single minded determination': 'Apparently in the morning after a great world crisis she was found sitting alone at breakfast altering the wording of the detailed proposals for English, while munching at her toast and marmalade. You might find that magnificent, frightening or both'. Graham, *Education Racket*, p.176.

⁷⁰ Ibid., pp. 146-7.

TGAT – ‘the wrong trade off’

While Duncan Graham was very much an unknown quantity when he was appointed to the NCC, and as such did not initially generate much controversy, Baker’s choice as chairman of this second ‘guardian’ body was called into question from the start. According to Angela Rumbold, ‘One morning, without any consultation, Baker announced that Phillip Halsey was to be Chairman of the SEAC. Of all the people who shouldn’t have been appointed!’⁷² Whereas Graham would prove to be too idiosyncratic, too independent minded, in trying to carve out a distinct and continuing role for the NCC, Halsey’s failings appeared to have been in the opposite direction. A profile in *Education* described how,

Mr. Halsey’s credentials are in one way impeccable; he pretty well invented the GCSE and guided DES policy on examinations for nearly ten years through both Labour and Conservative governments...his leadership of the 12 member Council will not stray too far from the DES policy...he will march his council in step with the traditional music of the mandarins rather than the wilder rhythms of the party politicians.⁷³

Halsey’s poisoned chalice, as in some respects was Graham’s, was the legacy of another Baker ‘wheeze’, this time in the form of the report of the Task Group on Assessment and Testing (TGAT). In his memoirs, Baker is noticeably coy about this crucial document, whose recommendations would dominate much of the following five years. In fact, he does not actually mention TGAT at all.⁷⁴ Baker had commissioned the Group in 1987 to report on how a national curriculum

⁷¹ Hedger interview.

⁷² Rumbold interview.

⁷³ *Education*, 27 March 1988.

⁷⁴ Baker’s omission of TGAT in his memoirs could be likened to an Irish historians’ recent comment on the almost total absence of the term ‘IRA’ from Gerry Adams’ biography: ‘It is rather like reading a biography of Field Marshall Montgomery that leaves out the British army’. Foster, R. F. (2001) *The Irish Story. Telling Tales and Making It Up in Ireland*. London: Allen Lane, pp. 177-8.

might be assessed. The original brief was to devise a workable scheme of assessment, with the unwritten brief that it had also to produce something that would satisfy Mrs Thatcher's preference for pen and paper tests, over the preferred professional model of teacher assessment. In appointing the membership of TGAT, Baker initiated the same strategy as with the subsequent National Curriculum working groups. Education professionals were drawn back into the loop regarding the nuts and bolts implementation. The experience of TGAT highlighted the same problem that would recur when the matter of subject content was given over entirely to subject specialists. As described by Peter Wilby, 'Baker had handed the National Curriculum back to the education establishment and coked it up politically. He then handed testing over to a group of people who made their living out of testing'.⁷⁵

One of those people who 'made their living out of testing', was Professor Paul Black, who would chair the Group.⁷⁶ Given six months to complete the task, a first report duly appeared in December 1987, with three supplementary reports at the end of March 1988. While there was an element of testing, it was not in the rigorous spirit that many on the right preferred and the idea of 'traditional' pass/fail tests was rejected. The main thrust of Black's proposals was a formal attempt to assimilate assessment much more with teaching. There was to be a system of Standard Assessment Tasks (SATs) that were to be integrated into classroom teaching and a new scale incorporating ten 'levels of attainment'.⁷⁷ The TGAT proposals were nothing if not ambitious. The normally supportive *Guardian*, very tentatively, and with almost a foreboding of 'it might all end in tears', described the report as 'an ingenious and innovative set of proposals, if

⁷⁵ Wilby interview.

⁷⁶ One right wing critic later described the appointment of someone like Black to design a 'simple to administer, understandable by all...cost-effective' system of testing was 'as Nikita Khrushchev might have said – like asking a goat to look after the cabbages'. Flew, A. (1994) *Shephard's Warning. Setting Schools Back on Course*. London: Adam Smith Institute, p. 111.

⁷⁷ The latter were seen as a major innovation although both the HMI report on the West German system (HMI, *Education in the Federal Republic of Germany*, p. 37) and the experience of the GCSE criteria had pointed the way, something to which the attention of members of the group was clearly drawn. Eric Bolton spoke of the need 'to establish an overarching assessment system and outcomes you could trust. The GCSE criteria showed what happened if you let loose academics on individual subjects. You end up in assessment chaos as everybody would so it differently'. Bolton interview.

highly complex'.⁷⁸ Mrs Thatcher, who may not have known much about assessment, certainly knew what she didn't like. In her memoirs, written half a dozen years later, this time with some justification, she remained scathing about her Secretary of State's acceptance of the Report. 'Ken Baker warmly welcomed the report', wrote Mrs Thatcher, 'Whether he had read it properly, I do not know: if he had it says much for his stamina'.⁷⁹ One forgotten side effect of the TGAT report was the ditching of the proposed reform of the A Level system, contained in the Higginson report. According to Jenny Bacon,

Higginson wanted to go for something which was much more like an IB (International Baccalaureate)...so anyway the political trade-off was Higginson got ditched and our A levels remained the jewel in the crown, the gold standard and we got TGAT. In retrospect it may have been the wrong trade off.⁸⁰

The 'trade off' was necessary because Mrs Thatcher would not countenance both TGAT and Higginson, but in typical fashion, then proceeded to try and claw back the ground given in accepting Black's report. According to Baker, almost immediately 'Mrs Thatcher started using guerrilla tactics from the sidelines and there was a tremendous attempt to pull the wool over my eyes over testing'.⁸¹ It was soon put about that Mrs Thatcher and her Policy Unit were unhappy. 'On TGAT we were constantly aware where Brian Griffiths, who was feeding fundamentalist right wing thinking to Mrs Thatcher, was coming from', recalled Jenny Bacon, 'We adapted the presentation to meet his main concerns. Griffiths, Sheila Lawlor and John Marenbon, these were the principal thorns in Baker's side'.⁸² This conflict became very public with the leaking to the *Independent*, in March 1988, of a letter from Mrs Thatcher's Office to Baker, highlighting some

⁷⁸ *The Guardian*, 29 March 1988.

⁷⁹ Thatcher, *Downing Street Years*, p. 595.

⁸⁰ Taylor, 'Mover and Shakers', p. 177.

⁸¹ Baker interview.

⁸² Bacon interview.

aspects of the report that the Prime Minister's found 'disturbing'.⁸³ The same month, it was reported that Sheila Lawlor's *Correct Core* was bedtime reading for Mrs Thatcher.⁸⁴ It was certainly brief enough and contained simple, straightforward examples of what pupils could have been expected to know at various ages. Such contributions were derided in typical fashion by the education establishment, while the TGAT proposals remained revered. Yet as the balance between what TGAT proposed and what was actually possible in the classroom shifted over subsequent years towards the original view of Mrs Thatcher and her supporters, so the distance between those in charge at the time and responsibility for what subsequently happened has also shifted. In his memoirs, Baker wrote rather disingenuously that 'Little was actually agreed before I left the department, but I had a feeling that this elaboration would cause trouble in the schools'.⁸⁵ The Civil Servants, distant from a classroom, had little concept of what the implementation of Black's report might involve and took little trouble to find out. Some thought and have remained convinced that it was an 'intellectually pleasing' document.⁸⁶ Like the 'platonic idea' of a national curriculum, one Under Secretary felt that 'Officials were, I think, carried away by the beauty of the structure and must take some of the blame'.⁸⁷

The TGAT proposals would have been difficult to implement at any time. Not only was a new national curriculum to be established with agreed subject content for ten subjects, something those at the NCC would have found challenging in itself, but this was now to be combined with an over-arching

⁸³ These included the fact that 'The Committee seem to have designed an enormously elaborate and complex system...tests are only a part of assessment, and that the major purpose of assessment is diagnostic and formative, rather than summative...the major role envisaged for LEAs...the general impression is that (the costs) would be very large...as a result of the complexity of the proposals, the new assessment system could not be introduced in less than five years. *The Independent*, 10 March 1988.

⁸⁴ *The Guardian*, 29 March 1988.

⁸⁵ Baker, *Turbulent Years*, p.200.

⁸⁶ Bacon interview.

⁸⁷ Saville interview. Although anyone with a pocket calculator at the time could have been foreseen what the 'beauty of the structure' would mean in practical terms for teachers although it only became apparent at the pilot stage in 1990 when the assessment of mathematics, English and science. These alone would have involved, 'a total of 32 "attainment targets" for Key Stage One (Years 1&2) alone. There were to be 227 "statements of attainment" for mathematics, science and English, which meant that for a class of thirty 7 year-olds, a teacher would need to grapple with as many as 6810 "statements of attainment"'. Chitty, C. (1992) *The Education System Transformed*. Manchester: Baseline Book Company, p. 59.

system of assessment. This new system superimposed a linear scale of ten different levels of attainment on each subject, with the attainment at each level also needing to be defined and assessed. Nick Stuart, the Deputy Secretary in the DES with overall responsibility for schools within the Education Act, was reported as describing the ‘clash of horns on the fourth floor (of Elizabeth House)’ between Jenny Bacon and David Forrester, his Under Secretaries responsible for the Curriculum and Testing respectively.⁸⁸ Forrester, responsible for SEAC, was concerned with trying to simplify the demands on the assessment structure, where some requirements were almost untestable. Bacon, responsible for the NCC, was only concerned with what pupils should know and learn. These conflicts between the curriculum bodies needed to be resolved in the face of a disinterested Secretary of State, and a Prime Minister who had wanted neither. Moreover, Mrs Thatcher’s own cherished, and potentially, the most radical proposal within the Education Reform Act, Grant Maintained schools, also appeared to be subject to ‘hijacking’ by perfidious officials and a complacent Secretary of State.

Grant Maintained schools – Unforeseen ways

In a phrase which goes to the heart of many of the neo-liberal proposals that would be contained within the 1988 Act, Mrs Thatcher described them as going ‘as far as we could towards a “public sector voucher”’.⁸⁹ Proposals for increased powers of management for schools, increased delegation of school budgets, formula funding for pupils, open enrolment and changes to the powers and composition of governing bodies were all intended to lay the groundwork for a voucher-type system, as well as provide schools with the experience they needed prior to becoming fully self-governing institutions. Although each of these measures, in turn, would generate their own level of contention, the greatest controversy would be over the proposed mechanism by which schools became self-governing, through ‘opting out’ of LEA control to become, in the new parlance, ‘Grant Maintained’ schools. According to Robert Balchin, the *irregular*

⁸⁸ Forrester interview.

⁸⁹ Thatcher, *Downing Street Years*, p. 591.

who would be most identified with the initiative, and who had opposed the introduction of a voucher scheme under Keith Joseph because of the unpreparedness of schools,

Grant Maintained schools were nothing new. No one thought them up. There are very few new ideas in education; groups sit down and look at old ideas and try and revive the good bits. Most of these had been cooking away in the CPS during the 1970s. I suppose the germ of an idea was born with E.G. West and his great little book, *Education and the State*. It was thought at that time, the idea of LEAs relinquishing authority, to be beyond stupidity. I saw the scenario when all schools were outside LEA control. LMS was the first step, a gateway through which all schools could be released.⁹⁰

Much more so than their first cousins, CTCs, Grant Maintained schools had the potential to radically alter the structure of education had they been as successful, as originally envisaged. By effectively turning schools into mini businesses, competing individually in the market place for students, they would also herald the end of the LEAs, whose primary *raison d'être* would also have been removed. The original policy emerged in the wake of the failed efforts with the voucher, coupled with Mrs Thatcher's increasing interest in education policy and Oliver Letwin's appointment to the Policy Unit. Stuart Sexton described how 'Oliver Letwin organised seminars at Number Ten as part of a series of policy meetings at one of which John McIntosh presented a paper on autonomous schools'.⁹¹ Just as Cyril Taylor had been personally encouraged by Mrs Thatcher following the CPS conference on technical schools, 'Mrs Thatcher was most

⁹⁰ Balchin interview. Balchin was robust about the pioneering role of Grant Maintained schools within the state system. When it was suggested during John Patten's time that Grant Maintained status could be extended to private schools, Balchin was scathing. 'Independent schools', he said, 'should stand on their own two feet. The Grant Maintained idea is not to prop up ailing boarding schools who should be responsive to the market'. *TES*, 5 June 1992

⁹¹ Sexton interview. McIntosh was headteacher at the London Oratory School and a member of the CPS. 'The LEA represents a tier of bureaucracy that is quite unnecessary', he would tell two American academics in their study of British education reform. 'It absorbs a disproportionate share of the resources. And I found myself spending a disproportionate amount of my time dealing with it. I wanted full autonomy'. Chubb, J. and Moe, T. (1992) *A Lesson in School Reform from Great Britain*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institute, p. 31.

impressed by his (McIntosh's) clarity of thought and he was invited back informally on several occasions'.⁹² Variations on the idea of 'autonomous schools' spread throughout the network of *irregular* groupings prior to finalising the 1987 manifesto, as evidenced in the pamphlets of the Hillgate Group and the No Turning Back Group. According to Angela Rumbold, 'The stress was on schools to be more independent. At some meetings of the NTBG, "mother" (Mrs Thatcher) would come along and listen and take away what she wanted'.⁹³ Yet even more so than with the National Curriculum, the ability of officials to manipulate the outcome was established on the back of what Balchin described as 'the political obfuscation and confusion that clouded the initiative at birth and played against it later on'.⁹⁴ Just as officials within the DES had sensed early on that Keith Joseph had severe reservations about a voucher scheme and played on these, so the same tactic would be used with Baker. It probably was not difficult to gauge Baker's stance. Angela Rumbold certainly felt that

Kenneth Baker didn't think it could ever work but put it in the Bill on the basis of "It's what she (Mrs Thatcher) wants". He appeared happy to put all his energy into raising money for City Technology Colleges and left the rest to subordinates.⁹⁵

Whatever rationale Baker tried to make later on, he was sold very early on the notion that regardless of their role, there could not be very many of them. 'You could not let all schools go Grant Maintained', he later explained, 'There would have been chaos and this was brought home to me very early'.⁹⁶ Even those very strong *irregular* advocates of Grant Maintained schools were also worried about how they could be introduced and it appeared that the nearer one was or the more involved in education policy, the more cautious the approach. According to

⁹² Sexton interview.

⁹³ Rumbold interview.

⁹⁴ Balchin interview.

⁹⁵ Ibid and Rumbold interview. Rumbold's own stance was almost as ambivalent. When it was later suggested during John MacGregor's time that LEAs should simply be abolished, she was publicly scathing. 'It is a complete nonsense', she was quoted as saying, 'We would have to reinvent local departments of education'. *Education*, 20 October 1989

⁹⁶ Baker interview.

Stuart Sexton, 'I was not in favour of all schools being forced to opt out. There was a danger of incompetent schools opting out and staying there but giving the policy a bad name'.⁹⁷ The most powerful supporter of Grant Maintained schools, Mrs Thatcher herself, never bothered with the nuances or possibilities of what opting out and Grant Maintained schools might entail, as opposed to the simplicities of what had gone before. According to Baker, Mrs Thatcher had a straightforward 'hankering in the back of her mind for Direct Grant Schools and blurted it out during the 1987 campaign'.⁹⁸ In fact, several times during the campaign and subsequently, but most prominently three days after the launch of the 1987 manifesto, when, as described by Baker, the Prime Minister 'plunged the policy into confusion'.

Baker described Mrs Thatcher's failure to rule out the possibility of Grant Maintained schools charging fees and setting their own admissions policies as 'simply wrong'.⁹⁹ Yet he was either being disingenuous in his description, or genuinely bemused by the 'obfuscation and confusion' at the time. As regards admissions policy, far from Mrs Thatcher being 'simply wrong', Sheila Lawlor, who wrote the manifesto briefing for Ministers, recalled that 'it clearly said that GM schools could set their own admissions policy. Baker went off message and spent all the time fighting Mrs Thatcher'.¹⁰⁰ As regards fees, it would also appear that the issue, far from being resolved, hung in the balance even during the campaign. During the first Sunday of the 1987 election campaign, one senior member of the CPS described how

Kenneth Baker rang five times for clarification regarding charging for Grant Maintained schools. Mrs Thatcher, at the height of her powers, with never less than ten per cent of a lead in the polls, gave in. It was

⁹⁷ Sexton interview. John Marks was also cautious: 'I never thought that it was the right thing for all schools to opt out. There was the need for consent, to achieve the policy through proving it was worth doing it. But we underestimated the power of LEAs to disrupt and pressure schools. You needed a core of GM schools to have a knock on effect on other LEA schools.' Marks interview.

⁹⁸ Baker interview.

⁹⁹ Baker, *Turbulent Years*, p. 194.

¹⁰⁰ Lawlor interview.

deliberately left vague in the manifesto and in fact the 1988 Act made it actually more restrictive than was previously the case.¹⁰¹

Following the election, the confusion continued, this time regarding the pace and extent of opting out. Baker, referring to an interview Mrs Thatcher gave to the *Independent* in September 1987, before the Bill was even published, described how ‘Margaret said, “I think most schools will opt out”. Yet again, as regards education policy, Margaret had rather strayed from the script’.¹⁰² As with the National Curriculum, there were now in effect two opposing scripts, as once it became necessary to work out the details, the controlling hand was again firmly with DES officials. In the hands of the non-committed Baker, the spirit of the original intentions was emasculated by the decision that Grant Maintained schools were not the future of state education but rather ‘a halfway house’ between the state and the private sector. As with CTCs, their number would be limited and their function was to act as a type of beacon for state schools. Even this limited vision was too much for his department.

While discussions about the National Curriculum may have been rumbling away for at least a decade within the Department, one official remarked that as regards Grant Maintained schools, ‘My impression is that this is very much a policy which came from the politicians which the Department was asked to develop’.¹⁰³ According to one study on how the Grant Maintained policy was implemented, ‘it was at this point in the history of opting out that the considerable influence exerted by officials on the education policy making process was most in evidence’.¹⁰⁴ In the authors’ wonderfully understated description, the officials were able to develop ‘the original policy proposals in ways unforeseen by its early advocates’.¹⁰⁵ According to the authors, ‘DES Civil Servants had to reconcile the philosophy and differing ambitions of the advocates of opted out schools, while securing the smooth running of the system. What

¹⁰¹ Unattributed interview material.

¹⁰² Baker, *Turbulent Years*, p. 220.

¹⁰³ Quoted in Fitz, J. Halpin, D. Power, S. (1993) *Grant Maintained Schools, Education in the Market Place*. London: Kogan Page Ltd., p. 26.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 26-27.

emerged was a policy framework that *enabled*, rather than *encouraged*, schools to opt out of LEA control'.¹⁰⁶ Schools were 'enabled' to opt out, in perhaps the same way that horses are 'enabled' to go around the Grand National course once the race is started. All that remains is the small matter of the fences. And fences there were aplenty, as an apparently straightforward proposal eventually took 52 sections of the Reform Act to achieve. Among those sections, it was perhaps the question of a ballot, the need for 'consent', that proved to be the most significant hurdle that schools had to cross, and the main bone of contention between those on the right as the debate continued over the following years. According to Balchin

The idea of the ballot was sold to Kenneth Baker on three grounds: there would be no 'avalanche' as it would be an effective limit on the number of applications; it would add some degree of democratic legitimacy; it would be difficult for a later government to go back to the *status quo ante*. Baker was aware how revolutionary his move was and every possible reason was given to Kenneth Baker why there should be a ballot. The Cabinet was worried about it. It was originally suggested that 75 per cent of parents were needed. At least Kenneth Baker kept it at a plain majority.¹⁰⁷

At the time, few on the right could argue against the need for a ballot as 'power to the parents' had long been a tenet of new right sloganeering. But the 'nitty gritty' of what this should mean in practice was never satisfactorily defined. Did it mean that parents had the power to decide on a school-by-school basis whether the school should be Grant Maintained? Or should it mean that parents had the right to choose which type of school they wanted for their children, within a school system laid down elsewhere? All in all, the policy as it emerged from the DES was a brilliant sleight of hand. Point by point, it was entirely defensible on the grounds of either practicality, or even ideology. The effect was, however, that

¹⁰⁵ Fitz, J. and Halpin, D. (1991) 'From a 'Sketchy Policy' to a 'Workable Scheme': the DES and grant-maintained schools. *International Studies in the Sociology of Education*, Vol. 1, p. 129.

¹⁰⁶ Fitz et al., *Grant Maintained Schools*, pp. 26-27.

‘the market principle (was) severely constrained in operation’ and ‘the details... preserved a great deal of the character of educational provision which existed prior to the introduction of GM policy’.¹⁰⁸ It was a legacy that Baker’s successors unsuccessfully struggled to overturn. As with the introduction of the National Curriculum, it appeared that Baker had allowed his officials to exert a key influence on the outcome of a key policy area, prompting further accusations of ‘subversion’ of government policy by the education establishment.

Conclusion

To coin a phrase, the Baker stewardship of education was really a game of two halves. Baker’s political agility and drive in sweeping up all the different strands of policy proposals and then getting them through in a single omnibus Bill, was impressive. The challenge, as well as the political opportunity that presented was something he clearly relished. According to David Hancock, Baker was at the top of his game during this period. ‘Up to 1987 he was very good indeed’, Hancock recalled, ‘We crawled through every line of the Bill with Baker chivvying officials with cries of “eyes down” when attention began to slip’.¹⁰⁹ Once the situation moved past the point of grand political gestures and manoeuvres, into the messy and frustrating minutiae of actually putting flesh on the bones of the various proposals, Baker’s attention moved elsewhere. After the Reform Act had passed through Parliament, in the words of Angela Rumbold, ‘Ken went out to lunch’.¹¹⁰

With its 238 clauses and 13 schedules the Act itself was described in the *Independent* as ‘a gothic monstrosity of legislation’.¹¹¹ With at least four major changes to the existing structure of schooling alone – the National Curriculum, local management of schools, CTCs and Grant Maintained schools – it is arguable how much control or oversight any Secretary of State, however

¹⁰⁷ Balchin interview.

¹⁰⁸ Fitz and Halpin, ‘From a “Sketchy Policy”’, p. 145.

¹⁰⁹ Hancock interview.

¹¹⁰ Rumbold interview. Baker was no doubt contemplating springboards new on the back of newspaper reports that he was now the Conservative backbench favourite to succeed Mrs. Thatcher. ‘Tory MPs favour Baker as next leader’, *The Independent*, 12 October 1987.

committed and knowledgeable, could have exercised. Baker was neither. His ambivalence towards the role of Grant Maintained schools, in a similar manner to Keith Joseph's ambivalence towards education vouchers, allowed officials to undermine the original spirit of the proposal. Did this entail a deliberate 'subversion' of the original proposals? There was an element of hostility towards the concept of Grant Maintained schools, whereby officials were certainly not unhappy that a restrictive model for opting out could be developed. According to David Forrester, 'There was a tendency towards ideological hostility towards a market system from people who had spent their lives working with the state system'.¹¹² Yet this undermining was part deliberate and part involuntary, in the sense that there was also a genuine conceptual 'blind spot' on the part of officials. Having been reared and immersed in the state system, they simply could not conceive of an unplanned, market-driven alternative: 'Schools have got to remain part of the fabric of the state system. We had to ensure that schools that opted out were able to discharge their responsibilities. The principle was that money could follow the child but that was within a *planned* system'.¹¹³ A lack of common purpose among the proponents of Grant Maintained schools as to exactly what they should be, resulted in a highly restrictive planned model for their introduction. This, in turn, was fought and refought over almost as soon as it was introduced and its consequences became apparent. Almost every supporter of Grant Maintained schools agreed that the original policy was too restrictive, but there was no agreement on how to overcome this. Should the terms of the ballot be changed? Should schools be simply forced to opt out? Should LEAs be abolished?

The same, or perhaps an even greater, degree of confusion was apparent in relation to the introduction of the National Curriculum, where there were a number of possible models on offer. In this case, rather than any ambivalence on Kenneth Baker's part, it was his personal determination to go for a comprehensive ten-subject model, with the support of his officials, that directly contradicted the political wishes of much of his Party and his Prime Minister.

¹¹¹ *The Independent*, 28 July 1988.

¹¹² Forrester interview.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

Without Baker's determined preference for a subject-led curriculum model, it is unlikely that officials could have resisted any alternative proposal. It was a decision his successors since 1988 have gradually tried to unravel, often to their political cost. Their travails were further exacerbated by Baker's lack of management and control over how his preferred model was to be implemented. With more than a passing nod in the direction of Baker, according to Clive Saville, 'The National Curriculum went disastrously wrong. Politicians think that passing a Bill through Parliament is the job done because it is something they could do. Ministers were impatient and only intermittently paid attention to details'.¹¹⁴ Nowhere was this more apparent than with Baker and indeed much of the blame for Duncan Graham's discomfort and the direction that the National Curriculum was to take, lay at Baker's door.

Baker himself later acknowledged that he 'never envisaged it would be as complex as it turned out to be',¹¹⁵ yet at the time made little effort to exercise control. Given the nonchalance with which he made the appointments to the working groups, it was little wonder that he took even less time with what they would produce, with the exception of his personal favourites. 'Apart from the English and History reports', recalled Jenny Bacon, 'Kenneth Baker wasn't interested in the nitty gritty and this was part of the problem with the Councils'.¹¹⁶ It would be stretching credulity to suggest that Baker's support for his preferred curriculum model, any more than his opposition to a radical restructuring of the schools system, was based on strong ideological or political principles. Baker himself described his contribution. 'I was always trying to take the politics out of it', he recalled a decade later, 'I am a practitioner. I would like to think I brought executive thrust to the job, a hands-on driving force'.¹¹⁷ Even the sceptics admired his drive. Balchin saw that 'Baker was enamoured by the idea of controlling the curriculum' and 'an entirely broad-brush guy. But at least he had the guts to take the ideas forward'.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁴ Saville interview.

¹¹⁵ Baker interview.

¹¹⁶ Bacon interview. Baker's approach was described by Nick Tate as 'affable but remote. He didn't trouble his mind with Attainment Targets. He was resting on his laurels'. Tate interview.

¹¹⁷ Baker interview.

¹¹⁸ Balchin interview.

The remaining question is why were the attempts by Mrs Thatcher and her *irregular* allies to exert greater control over this stage of the policy process so unsuccessful? According to Dominic Morris, then at the Cabinet Office and later to join the Number Ten Policy Unit,

The Prime Minister's ability to sack people for not quite doing what you want them to is limited. You can stop them doing things if it is a binary decision, like interest rate rises. But for flow processes or project management, they are in a poor position.¹¹⁹

Given the scale and the structure of the education project that they themselves had set in train, and the number of processes and people involved, subsequent interventions by Mrs Thatcher and others could be never more than, as Baker himself described, 'guerrilla tactics'. They were able to wound, but not to kill, as the 'binary decisions' taken within ad hoc sub-committees about what policy proposals to include or not include in a manifesto, were replaced by an almost unimaginable welter of details and minutiae, diffused among a whole variety of groups and interests.

Baker no doubt sensed that such a proposition was not conducive to his upwardly mobile career path. At the 1987 Conservative Party Conference, Baker had said in a typical poetic flourish that 'I have put my hand to the plough of education reform and I will carry it through to the end of the furrow'.¹²⁰ After three years at the DES, with the 'end of the furrow' still a long way off, but with the both the details and the acrimony, beginning to pile up, Baker had clearly had enough and in July 1989 he became Conservative Party Chairman.¹²¹ Although Baker's desire for this post had been trailed in the press to the point of tedium, his adviser was not so keen. 'I did not want him to move', recalled Tony Kerpel, 'I argued that he should stay and let the reforms bed in. It would also help to lose his reputation of not seeing things through and might stand him in good stead

¹¹⁹ Dominic Morris interview. 27 October 1998.

¹²⁰ *The Guardian*, 8 November 1987.

¹²¹ So had his Permanent Secretary, who left a few weeks prior to Baker. 'After 1987', recalled David Hancock, 'he (Baker) became increasingly arrogant and impatient, and by 1989 I had had enough although I didn't know he was going'. Hancock interview.

later, politically, if he could make them work'.¹²² Baker himself reacts indignantly to the charge of 'not seeing things through'. 'I was accused of always leaving things undone which I resent very much indeed', he said. Nor should there have been any problem about making the reforms work. 'If I could change anything', said Baker, 'I would have simplified the tests, increased the administrative help to schools and extended the school day'.¹²³ Such a nice straightforward list disguised the multitude of problems that Baker's politically driven reform package bequeathed his successors, who, according to one observer had an added handicap: 'Baker at least had a game plan. His successors had none'.¹²⁴

¹²² Kerpel interview.

¹²³ Baker interview.

¹²⁴ Mike Baker interview. 13 August 1999.

CHAPTER 7

July 1989 – November 1990: *'The worst job in government?'*

Introduction

It is reasonably safe to assume that, in replacing Baker, Mrs Thatcher wanted someone to put the reforms back on the right track in the face of what she already knew was a powerful and entrenched education establishment. Even if it had been clear what exactly was the agreed 'right track', John MacGregor was clearly not the ideological gladiator who was needed. He was always more a technician than an ideologue, one of those politicians for whom the term a 'safe pair of hands' could have been invented. Indeed, this was exactly what many people felt was needed after the roller coaster of the Baker years. Demitri Coryton, chairman of the Conservative Education Association, wrote in the *TES* that 'What our school system now needs more than anything is a period of consolidation, with as little organizational change as possible. John MacGregor has a reputation as a "doer", a man who tries to solve problems. That is exactly what is now needed at the Department of Education and Science'.¹

This chapter examines how well MacGregor dealt with the problems he inherited. 'Under constant pressure from me, (MacGregor) did what he could', was Mrs Thatcher's assessment, before she finally ran out of patience with her fourth Education Secretary since 1979.² How was it that this highly competent and well-liked politician found himself moving on after the shortest tenure at education since Patrick Gordon-Walker in 1968? Was this due to personal, policy or political factors? Apart from managing the reforms, was there a further and much trickier predicament facing MacGregor in terms of just how highly politicised the area of education policy had become?

¹ 'MacGregor's tangle of loose ends', *TES*, 22 July 1989.

‘Signs of greenness’

It probably says something about the level of compartmentalisation of modern government, and/or the lack of Cabinet discussion, that MacGregor seemed to wander in from a distant part of government, blissfully unaware of what had been happening in the world of education. He was certainly unaware of Baker’s increasing discomfiture and eagerness to move from the DES:

I don’t think Kenneth Baker’s departure was that well trailed. It was certainly a surprise to me. I was on the way to a meeting in Brussels about sheep meat on the Friday evening. It was a critical meeting and I was on my way to Heathrow when Mrs Thatcher rang and told me she wanted me to be Secretary of State for Education but I was to go to Brussels and close the meeting first. So I had two jobs for that weekend.³

Looking back over his time as Education Secretary, MacGregor later recalled that ‘The world of education is full of people who wish to propagate their own views. It means that you constantly move into a maelstrom of argument’.⁴ Yet in his initial dealings with education, there was also more than a hint of arrogance and insularity, terms not often associated with MacGregor, that made his ability to survive in this ‘maelstrom’ even more difficult. Through the political network MacGregor had clearly been warned against his new Department. ‘The DES was a little bit isolated and tended to regard itself as itself’, he later recalled, ‘There were some weak links and different aspects were causing me concern. Every educationist and lobbyist, including those within the Department wanted everything. I didn’t want to be beholden to officials’.⁵ He certainly had an uneasy relationship with Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector, Eric Bolton. According to MacGregor, ‘Eric Bolton was very

² Thatcher, *Downing Street Years*, p. 597.

³ John MacGregor interview, 15 November 2000.

⁴ Ribbins and Sherratt, *Radical Education Policies*, p. 139.

woolly and did not have a huge impact, certainly not with me. He was far from being a Chris Woodhead'.⁶ For Bolton's part, he in turn felt that MacGregor treated HMI as 'a consultancy to use when and where he wanted. Soon after he was appointed I tried to persuade him to be in London for the publication of the annual report of HMI but he didn't take the advice with the result that Jack Straw stole all the headlines. There was a kafuffle in No. 10 as to why he (MacGregor) wasn't there. Signs of greenness of a new Minister'.⁷

Equally unimpressed with the approach of the new Secretary of State was his predecessor's adviser, Tony Kerpel:

I was in my office at the Department (for DES) for two weeks after Kenneth Baker moved to the Home Office. John MacGregor never asked to see me which was very foolish. He was not equal to the poison chalice and obdurate officials were able to reopen debates.⁸

The obvious point of contact for MacGregor to 'sound out' the previous regime would have been his own political adviser, Eleanor Laing. The choice of Laing, a Scottish lawyer with an eye on a safe southern seat and little experience of education issues, would prove too much of a luxury for MacGregor as he grappled with his 'poison chalice'. 'Mine was a political appointment', Laing herself told the *TES*, 'I'm not an educationist but when I heard the job would probably involve working in education I was delighted'.⁹ MacGregor appeared to have briefly considered appointing a more specialist adviser, but in the end chose to rely on his own experience. 'There wasn't an obvious person I could appoint from education', he said, 'And in any case, I didn't feel I needed one'.¹⁰ Laing echoed her minister's idea that his 'lay' experience was more than sufficient for his new job. 'John MacGregor

⁵ MacGregor interview.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Bolton interview.

⁸ Kerpel interview.

⁹ *TES*, 3 November 1989.

¹⁰ MacGregor interview.

already had extensive political experience and knowledge', recalled Laing, 'His own connections in education would tell him what was going wrong, what was happening. He was also a constituency MP and knew there were worries'.¹¹ MacGregor's intention to rely on 'his own connections' was apparent in his first dealings with his new Department. John Caines, his Permanent Secretary recalled how, over the choice of Press Officer,

Jim Coe came from MAFF. MacGregor called me at a Buckingham Palace garden party to let me know what had happened. He insisted that Coe come with him. Coe was from the Government Information Service and officials in the Education Department were vehemently opposed to someone from the GIS operating in the Department. But MacGregor insisted.¹²

Like Laing, Coe was someone unacquainted with education and joked on taking up his new posting about 'still having mud on his wellies'.¹³ Caines himself, MacGregor's most senior official, was relatively new to the Department, having replaced David Hancock the previous May. He was almost as wary as MacGregor of his new Department:

It was a disadvantage being parachuted in to the Department. Although I wouldn't say it was anything like the caricature, there was an element in the Department that was inward looking. It had been shaped by enormously powerful influences and strong characters whose influence was still apparent. There is always the danger of abdicating power and influence to the Deputy Secretaries. Tony Kerpel noted that I sat directly in front of the Ministers, whereas David Hancock used to sit off to the side.¹⁴

¹¹ Eleanor Laing interview, 5 March 1998.

¹² Caines interview.

¹³ *Education*, 3 November 1989.

¹⁴ Caines interview.

Caines had worked with MacGregor at the DTI and both men had got on well together. Surprisingly, or perhaps unsurprisingly, it was the Civil Servant, Caines, who was much more attuned to the political requirements of MacGregor's task and who sensed that MacGregor's talents were perhaps not the best suited to the immediate job in hand. 'I had worked with John MacGregor in the DTI', recalled Caines, 'but Education had a level of interference in details on a quite different scale from the DTI. He was a conciliator by temperament, a listener, and increasingly more cautious than Kenneth Baker. He was a details man. Perhaps too much so with earnest debate over details'.¹⁵ Whereas other officials were able to use the adviser as a sounding board for their Minister, Caines felt that possibly due to her inexperience of education and lack of experience in working with MacGregor, 'Eleanor Laing made very little impression. I was never quite sure of his other sources of advice'.¹⁶ Eric Bolton was scathing about MacGregor's 'other sources'. According to Bolton, MacGregor 'fell in with the "Scottish mafia" such as Eric Anderson (headmaster of Eton) and Canon Pilkington who aimed at the best preservation they could get of the old classical standards'.¹⁷ Peter Watkins at the NCC also felt that 'there was a powerful independent schools lobby to which John MacGregor appeared to be in thrall'.¹⁸

It is probably inaccurate to say that MacGregor was as completely in thrall to a 'Scottish mafia', any more than he totally ignored his own officials. His dilemma was that, neither acting on, nor ignoring, advice from either of these sources would have been sufficient in itself to make a success of his job. Other than using his own instinct, MacGregor had no blueprint or clear rationale to prioritise the reforms which he inherited. Lacking the lodestar of either burning ambition like Baker, or the fiery ideology of Mrs Thatcher, he quickly became bogged down in details. A significant and related problem was his failure to grasp the 'hidden curriculum' he had inherited, the politicisation of education policy.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Bolton interview.

Into the ‘maelstrom’

What critics and friends alike agreed on was the magnitude of the task facing MacGregor. His in tray was full of items that carried the burden of different ambitions for different groups that were involved in their introduction. Eleanor Laing explained how

As to whether “the worst job in government” was to be Kenneth Baker’s successor, that description would be a good starting point for any discussion of the problems facing his successor. His (MacGregor’s) brief was to make the thing work. Kenneth Baker’s work was highly commendable but was also massively bureaucratic. He was good at the basics of getting the Bill through but totally unpragmatic.¹⁹

The problem was that for Mrs Thatcher ‘making the thing work’ meant hacking back to a core or minimalist curriculum, pen and paper testing, while driving forward opting out to get rid of LEAs and ‘freeing’ schools. MacGregor, who could not have been fully aware of, and did not take the trouble to discover, the bitter ideological controversies over many of the reforms in the Education Reform Act, took his brief literally, that is, to try to make Baker’s reforms ‘work’. Very soon after his appointment, a senior DES official was quoted as saying that ‘he (MacGregor) sees the agenda as already having been set and his job is to get on and do it as effectively as possible’.²⁰ It was apparent that MacGregor very quickly prioritised the gargantuan task of introducing the National Curriculum. In his defence, MacGregor argued that other issues were to be dealt with later on as ‘Mrs Thatcher told me that she expected me to be there until the next election. And I think she meant it. I then planned on that basis and that was how I approached my new job’.²¹

¹⁸ Peter Watkins in *Headlines*, 1993, 11, p. 66.

¹⁹ Laing interview.

²⁰ *Education*, 6 October 1989.

²¹ MacGregor interview.

In tackling the National Curriculum, MacGregor was probably at one with his senior officials and one certain instance of where he also agreed with their advice was the need to get teachers 'on board' if the initiative was to succeed. When Keith Joseph handed over to Kenneth Baker in 1986, his parting advice was 'Don't make the same mistake I did in attacking the teachers'.²² For his own reasons, Baker had little choice but to continue to ride roughshod over the teaching profession, to the extent that at the time of his departure, aside from everything else that was happening, David Hancock felt that his 'great worry' was 'a demoralised profession'.²³ This priority he passed on to John Caines. Caines characterised the situation as it had developed whereby

Kenneth Baker in his effort to soften up the ground for his attack had bombed out and demoralised the profession. MacGregor fell victim to the relics of this bombing campaign. He wanted to recreate a sense of purpose and went into listening mode. He was talking to the victims, talking to people whom others wanted to be kicked in the loins.²⁴

Early on, letters were sent out to headteachers praising them for their hard work. At the Party Conference, he informed the gathering that he was taking personal charge of appraising the outflow of 'bumf' to schools.²⁵ Meetings were arranged with other interested parties. Meeting Kenneth Baker was described as 'never much fun' by one of those involved. According to the description by Michael Barber, then with the NUT, 'He (Baker) managed to appear to be listening without ever seeming terribly interested, still less moved'.²⁶ With MacGregor, the listener par excellence, the mood changed. After one meeting on schools funding, Steven Byers, then chairman of the Labour- controlled Association of Metropolitan Authorities emerged to

²² Baker, *Turbulent Years*, p. 161.

²³ Hancock interview.

²⁴ Caines interview.

²⁵ *Education*, 13 October 1989.

²⁶ *TES*, 31 May 1996.

describe the Secretary of State as ‘someone we are happy to work with’, a remark that was surely one of the first of a long line of nails in MacGregor’s coffin.²⁷

While taking an emollient approach in his public utterances and actions on policy may have been within MacGregor’s own gift, the more intractable problem remained the National Curriculum itself. ‘It was certainly true that Kenneth wasn’t a details man and he would be the first to admit it himself’, recalled MacGregor, ‘and I spent a very considerable amount of time, almost too much time getting the National Curriculum into shape. I didn’t expect to be wading through enormous tomes. Neither did we realise that these huge unwieldy bodies (the NCC and SEAC), probably set up at the instigation of someone like Nick Stuart, would result in massive bureaucracies’.²⁸ Very early on he also discovered how documents could be fought over between *irregulars*, *regulars* and *politicos* like a fox between hounds, as one of his first decisions relating to the curriculum had to deal with the report of the history working group.

The chair of the group, chosen personally by Baker was Michael Saunders-Watson, a retired naval officer and stately home owner. Saunders-Watson was no match for the professionals on his group. The interim report, which went to Baker in June 1989, was far too ‘progressive’ both for Baker and the right to swallow. The attainment targets on which assessment would be based, focussed almost exclusively on ‘understanding and skills’, rather than any body of historical knowledge. Baker told Saunders-Watson that this was not acceptable. More facts had to be included. This was the situation when MacGregor replaced Baker. It fell to MacGregor to write to the group with the entirely sensible observation that the existing approach ran the risk ‘that pupils’ grasp of the substance of history will not be clearly established or assessed’. To the professionals, this was heresy. Any suggestion in favour of ‘traditional’ aspects of learning in whatever subject was immediately branded as right wing.²⁹ MacGregor asked the working group to look again at ways

²⁷ *TES*, 9 November 1990.

²⁸ MacGregor interview.

²⁹ Robert Skidelsky, always more of a historian than a politician, resented how the desire to promote or reinstate a greater degree of factual knowledge in history had become associated with right wing

of including essential historical knowledge in the attainment targets. It was to little avail. The final report went to MacGregor in March 1990. According to Duncan Graham, 'nothing had been altered. . .as the working group's conclusions were unarguable'.³⁰

Mrs Thatcher and her advisers were not pleased. Two months later, the report remained unpublished. The *TES* reported that 'Thatcher's disapproval holds up history report' following a 'top-level meeting between Mr. John MacGregor. . .and the Prime Minister'.³¹ MacGregor's exasperation at the situation in which he found himself and his attempts at 'holding the ring' between conflicting interests remained palpable years after the event:

There was a problem about history and frankly, I started to get pretty sick of it towards the end...Brian Griffiths had a bee in his bonnet over history. And she (Mrs Thatcher) agreed...(Griffiths) felt very strongly about history and I spent a good deal of time trying to take him along with how we were trying to find a solution to the history issue.³²

The key player in the 'solution' was Nick Stuart, who persuaded MacGregor to publish the original report, while announcing at the same time that he (MacGregor) would conduct his own investigation into history. According to Graham, this 'investigation' was conducted 'largely (by) Nick Tate, NCC's history officer with help from myself. . .the Civil Servants, and *sotto voce* from HMI...By some inspired arrangement we persuaded MacGregor that, while facts could not be included in the attainment targets, they were nonetheless an integral part of the course'.³³ When the Council's report went back to MacGregor, his only suggestion was changing the name of one of the attainment targets and giving it more weight in the assessment scheme, but without 'strangely. . .adjusting the statements of attainment which go to

thought: 'To immediately equate "knowledge" with a political position was totally crass'. Skidelsky interview.

³⁰ Graham and Tytler, *A Lesson for Us All*, pp. 64-6.

³¹ *TES*, 30 March 1990.

³² Ribbins and Sherratt, *Radical Education Policies*, p. 140.

make up each attainment target'.³⁴ Delay and obfuscation had proved to be on the side of the education establishment, with Duncan Graham calling the revised report 'a little gem. . .with some "magic words" to appease the right'.³⁵

MacGregor's indecisiveness in dealing with the issue and his willingness to accept the 'little gem' certainly blotted his copy book with the right, a situation that was further exacerbated by his inept handling of its eventual publication in August 1990. By that time, further damage had already been done. In March, it was reported that MacGregor was 'ready to slow down the assessment juggernaut before it is too late to stop it careering out of control. . .by announcing a decision in the name of simplification and easing of the overload'. Such a decision, which was presumably to be welcomed by teachers, was also greeted with suspicion by the education establishment. Moving, as it did, back towards the much more straightforward model originally preferred by the right, the announcement was seen as 'a victory for the hawks'.³⁶ The following month, MacGregor told a teacher union conference that the plan was to drop testing for seven and 11 year olds in all nine compulsory subjects. He said that formal tests would now only cover English, mathematics and science. The following week, Mrs Thatcher decided to publicly force the pace on the scope of the compulsory curriculum. Her frustration at the slow progress of the Secretary of State in tackling the issue, was revealed in an interview with the *Sunday Telegraph*, in which she openly questioned the direction the National Curriculum was taking. In an interview with the *TES* during May, MacGregor 'made no secret of the fact that further school reforms are now firmly off the agenda'. The 'highest priority' was 'making the National Curriculum work' and with reference to Key Stage 4, he used what the interviewer described as an 'intriguing phrase', this being 'how do you get the whole of that quart (the 14-16 curriculum) into a curriculum pint pot'?

In relation to opting out, although his 'enthusiasm' was 'undiminished', he said he was 'a great believer in letting people make their own decisions and

³³ Graham and Tytler, *A Lesson for Us All*, p. 66.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 69.

³⁵ Graham, *Education Racket*, p. 186.

judgements'.³⁷ The following month, Mrs Thatcher intervened once again. Her own instincts were much more in tune with the neo-liberal view. The key to standards was in the structure of the schools system and she was unhappy about her Secretary of State's laissez-faire attitude towards opting out and what was felt to be the obstructionism of local authorities. In an option that was to reappear on many occasions over the next decade, Mrs Thatcher said that she was looking into the possibility of using legislation to make it easier for schools to opt out of local authority control. These remarks reportedly 'left the Education Secretary stuttering a bit so it would be safe to say that the DES has not yet turned a thought as to what such legislation might say'.³⁸

Amidst looking nervously over his shoulder at Mrs Thatcher, and under pressure from his friends in the independent schools lobby over the curriculum, there was also the constant argument from the NCC not to drop subjects from the compulsory curriculum. Duncan Graham was quoted as saying that the dropping of some subjects would be 'a backward step'. MacGregor, with evident frustration, replied that 'there is not much point in having an arrangement if schools in practice decide they cannot use it'.³⁹ Neither did it help that the NCC continued to show its preference for the whole curriculum approach. *Curriculum Guidance 3*, issued in 1990, stated that 'In due course it is likely that schools will throw all the attainment targets in a heap on the floor and reassemble them in a way which provides for them the very basis of the whole curriculum'.⁴⁰ The most galling and ridiculous aspect of all the criticisms was that, while MacGregor was coming under increasing pressure from the leader of the Conservative Party in Downing Street for not being radical enough, he had also to try and deal with was the criticism that he was being too radical. These criticisms emanated from Conservative Central Office and the newly-installed Chairman of the Conservative Party, Kenneth Baker.

³⁶ *TES*, 2 March 1990.

³⁷ *TES*, 16 May 1990.

³⁸ *TES*, 29 June 1990.

³⁹ See e.g. *Education*, 21 September 1990, 3 August 1990, 12 October 1990.

⁴⁰ Quoted in Marsland and Seaton, *The Empire Strikes Back*, p. 3.

In June, the *TES* noted that ‘according to reports Kenneth Baker is not best pleased to hear of MacGregor’s modifications on some of his more unworkable instant reforms’.⁴¹ Within the Department, John Caines felt that ‘Many of the knives were thrown at him (MacGregor) by his own party. Kenneth Baker also had a lot to answer for the whispering campaign. He didn’t like what he saw as MacGregor’s “trimming”’.⁴² The view of John Clare was that ‘MacGregor started to hack back the curriculum but Baker chopped him. MacGregor understood quite quickly what was happening but he didn’t have the political clout to take on Baker who saw any tinkering with his National Curriculum, any clawing back, as a personal attack on his achievement’.⁴³ MacGregor did not have the ‘political clout’ nor the political nimbleness or the brio to put his case across effectively. One correspondent described the difference between MacGregor and his predecessor in the following terms:

Whereas Baker always arrived for a television interview with a pre-masticated “sound bite”, MacGregor would chew on and on for ages, singularly failing to deliver something pithy and short. . . He also did not have Baker’s finesse in the political art of minding your back.⁴⁴

Even the *TES* was slightly adrift after the Baker years. Having been used to ‘the glossy up-front grin’ of his predecessor, it now found it ‘rather baffling not to have every decision conveyed to us by Kenneth Baker’s public relations machine’.⁴⁵ MacGregor was regarded as so anonymous that the satirical television show, *Spitting Image*, portrayed him as the Minister with a bag over his head. Too late, his advisers seemed to have realised the damage that MacGregor’s lack of public dynamism was doing. In May, it was reported that he was taking public relations advice on his image and presentation. While not denying the stories at the time, his adviser said

⁴¹ *TES*, 29 June 1990.

⁴² Caines interview.

⁴³ Clare interview.

⁴⁴ Baker, M. (1994) *Who Rules Our Schools?* London: Hodder & Stoughton, p. 128.

⁴⁵ *TES*, 29 December 1989.

the reports were ‘greatly exaggerated. This is a real mountain out of a molehill story. Mr. MacGregor is more concerned about policy than presentation and doing the best for children than putting on a glitzy, glossy media front’.⁴⁶ Looking back on the episode, Eleanor Laing suggested that,

It was all got up by Kenneth Baker. But there was a hidden truth in that he had taken over from an enormously successful self-publicist and was left standing in terms of the profile stakes. I did try to convince him to heighten his profile considerably after three months, but he was not into personal aggrandisement, not interested in sound bites.⁴⁷

Mrs Thatcher’s eventual justification for replacing MacGregor was that she ‘wanted a new face at Education, where John MacGregor’s limitations as a public spokesman were costing us dear in an area of great importance’.⁴⁸ The writing was certainly on the wall during the spring and summer of 1990, and any sense of isolation MacGregor may have had must have increased with the appointment of Tim Eggar as Minister of State and Michael Fallon as the Parliamentary Under Secretary in July.

Getting the balance wrong

The appointments of Eggar and Fallon were interpreted in the *Daily Mail* as Mrs Thatcher taking ‘a personal grip on the schools crisis. . .she moved two new ministers into a department under siege from parents, teachers and irate independent school chiefs and effectively put Education Secretary John MacGregor himself under notice to get on with it or else’.⁴⁹ Like others before and after them, the new

⁴⁶ *Education*, 4 May 1990.

⁴⁷ Laing interview.

⁴⁸ Thatcher, *Downing Street Years*, p. 835.

⁴⁹ Fallon and Eggar were replacing Robert Jackson and Angela Rumbold. Jackson had been particularly ineffective and had botched the introduction of student loans, while rumours had been circulating in the press that that Rumbold was to ‘move onto higher things’ having blotted her copy book with the right. (See e.g. *Education*, 27 July 1990) Rumbold herself was aware that ‘In the rows

junior ministers felt that they had been subjected to the personal 'laying on of hands' by the Prime Minister. According to Fallon,

MacGregor did not have a strong team. There was no political drive. Mrs Thatcher was in despair saying that something had got to be done about those councils, about our reforms. I was in no doubt that I was being sent in to help 'sort it out'.⁵⁰

Eggar was later described as 'being told forcibly by No. 10 that the Education Act was fine structurally, but that the practical implementation of it was going wrong, and that MacGregor was not robust enough to ring the changes'. Both men were extremely ambitious and, at the risk of understatement, highly combative. But it was Fallon, described in *Education* as 'possibly the most right wing Education minister ever', who earned lasting opprobrium for his aggressiveness. John Clare's description of Fallon is particularly apposite: 'Fallon was a right wing ferret. Mrs Thatcher liked him. He never troubled in private to disguise his contempt for MacGregor and, indeed, his contempt for most people'.⁵¹ Those on the right found Fallon's no-nonsense style and accessibility a welcome change. John Marks described Fallon as 'very dynamic'. 'He (Fallon) would ask to see me in the House of Commons', recalled Marks, 'ask three things and then ask if anything else should be raised. He was very businesslike. It was obvious why he got on well with someone like Kenneth Clarke'.⁵² Fallon himself described the circumstances of his appointment:

The Civil Servants ran the end game. Kenneth Baker never lifted his head above what was going on. The lobby groups were ferocious and the pressure

over the introduction of GCSE, the reform of A-levels and so on, I was accused of being 'wet' behind the ears and fell out of favour'. By this time in any case she felt that she had enough of her boss, recalling that 'John MacGregor was a nightmare to work for. He would not do the work, would not open his boxes and you couldn't get a decision out of him'. Rumbold interview.

⁵⁰ Fallon interview.

⁵¹ Clare interview.

⁵² Marks interview.

was enormous. The distance between the core and foundation subjects was quickly lost. I assumed that I was being given higher education after the sacking of Jackson. I fought to be given responsibility for LMS. Angela Rumbold had introduced LMS rather gently, with a leisurely timetable. The Civil Servants argued that you couldn't do LMS for primaries, that the governors would misuse the money and so on. The Civil Servants seemed in thrall of the LEAs who were threatening legal action.⁵³

With Fallon and Eggar in post, there began an almost-constant challenge to the pace and direction of the reforms, with the NCC and SEAC the obvious targets. Duncan Graham described the first encounter with Eggar as 'extremely difficult', with the minister 'visibly prejudiced against the council and what it was doing. . . Fallon also intervened although he had little to do with the curriculum. He nonetheless kept turning up at the meetings with MacGregor where he was overtly hostile. Natural courtesy was not Fallon's strong point. We once met on a train from York and he was not even prepared to exchange the time of day'.⁵⁴ The style and thrust of his new junior ministers obviously threw the 'softly softly' approach of MacGregor into sharp relief. Despite Mrs Thatcher's assurance on his appointment, MacGregor himself began to feel the pressure from the right and tried to adjust his rhetoric accordingly, if unconvincingly. 'I am not a cautious consolidator', he told one interviewer at this time, 'I am a radical politician'.⁵⁵ But two incidents in quick succession further highlighted his deficiencies in this area.

The first was the eventual publication, at the end of July 1990, of the final report of the history working group. A return to facts, events and traditional teaching was the version MacGregor's advisers in the DES were trying to place on the report. Despite this, simple assertions could not disguise the relatively cosmetic changes that had been made. According to the *TES*, 'Far fewer changes to the final report are called for by the Education Secretary than were generally expected. . . And although

⁵³ Fallon interview.

⁵⁴ Graham and Tytler, *A Lesson for Us All*, pp. 110-11.

⁵⁵ *TES*, 9 November 1990.

Mr. MacGregor wants more weight on the knowledge attainment target. . .he has moved further from prescribing key names, dates and events than traditionalists on the Conservative Right wanted'. So much so, that the professionals, in the shape of a spokesman for the Historical Association, said that MacGregor's proposals offer 'a balanced and realistic way forward for the teaching of History, giving little comfort to the sectarians who continue to perpetuate the sterile debate over skills versus content'.⁵⁶ The failed attempt to spin the revised report of the history group was an amateurish miscalculation. In the judgement of the right, if MacGregor believed he had met the original objections to the interim report, he had been easily blinkered by the education establishment. If he didn't believe he had met the objections, but was willing to accept the final report, then he was not to be trusted.

Almost exactly the same set of circumstances arose in early August with the first changes that were to be made to the composition of the curriculum bodies, the NCC and SEAC. Disquiet about how Baker had managed the original appointments had been rife, something that MacGregor was aware of, and he was sympathetic to the criticism levelled at Baker's choices. 'The balance on the bodies wasn't right', he recalled, 'He (Baker) hadn't spent enough time thinking about who was appointed to the bodies. He left it to officials and didn't think through what he wanted the bodies to do. For the first year I was unable to replace anybody to try and get the balance better by putting on people more in tune with our way of thinking'.⁵⁷ But, once again, inflated reports in the weekend press of 'the night of the long knives' at the curriculum bodies proved less than accurate. Rather than the anticipated wholesale changes to the composition of the NCC and SEAC, only five changes were made, which marginally altered the political balance on the councils.⁵⁸ The whole exercise was subsequently described as more of 'a mouse rather than a rottweiler', with 'red faces at the DES over the manner in which the changes had been flagged up as evidence that MacGregor meant business'. According to a spokesman at the DES, 'Someone decided to put a political spin in the

⁵⁶ 'MacGregor fails to ruffle history critics', *TES*, 3 August 1990.

⁵⁷ MacGregor interview.

⁵⁸ *TES*, 10 August 1990.

announcement', adding that the forewarning in the weekend press was 'a bit of a flam'.⁵⁹

Mac the knifed

The political pressure on MacGregor began to mount as the October Party Conference approached. From the perspective of many in the education world, MacGregor was still very much seen as the man with whom they could do business. According to the *TES*, 'Many of the recycled lobby whispers of dissatisfaction with MacGregor's performance can safely be discounted. . . he is in fact performing with considerable political skill, tact and common sense'.⁶⁰ Despite MacGregor's steady, if unspectacular, progress on nudging the National Curriculum towards workability, the political impression had been created of someone not quite up to the job, lacking rigour in driving Conservative policies forward. 'MacGregor was very vulnerable', recalled one observer, 'You got the sense that he really cared. There was a whispering campaign with stories being generated by the political rather than the education correspondents'.⁶¹ The sources of this 'whispering campaign' were hinted at by MacGregor's wife, when she was interviewed in *Education* in September. 'He had never enjoyed a job so much', she said, 'He's really putting his heart and soul into it and I have never seen him so fulfilled'. However, she maintained a discreet silence when she was asked about his views about his predecessor and his ministerial colleagues.⁶² With opting out, the keystone policy for many on the right, also showing serious signs of flagging, MacGregor's earlier hands-off approach only further added grist to the whisper mill. Despite his protestations of enthusiasm for opted-out schools, MacGregor had only tinkered at the margins. 'I was extremely keen on Grant Maintained schools', he said, 'The Department was not so enthusiastic and tried to see them off. DES officials were afraid of the lack of control. I kept pushing GM schools and had to set up the Grant Maintained

⁵⁹ *Education*, 10 August 1990.

⁶⁰ *TES*, 17 July 1989.

⁶¹ M. Baker interview.

Foundation to act as a clearing house for information and publicity'.⁶³ In September 1990, he wrote to Conservative constituency activists, urging them to do more to promote opting out in their area, a move that appeared as a rather forlorn attempt to pre-empt criticism from Tory right wingers at the Party Conference.⁶⁴ If so, he was unsuccessful. At the Conference during the following month, he found himself having to deal with the return of that old panacea from the early 1980s, vouchers.

'When things go adrift as during MacGregor's tenure', said John Clare, 'weird things pop up, for example vouchers reappeared again near the end'.⁶⁵ Under attack at a fringe meeting at the Party Conference, MacGregor ruled out vouchers for education, saying that local management of schools, with money following pupils was 'quite close to the voucher concept'. He also ruled out any new changes to allow Grant Maintained schools to opt out of the National Curriculum.⁶⁶ Stuart Sexton replied with the faith of a true believer that reforms like local management of schools were 'only a staging post to a full blown system of vouchers'.⁶⁷ Two days later, in her keynote speech, Mrs Thatcher distanced herself from her Secretary of State, when she hinted that vouchers could be a manifesto commitment. Speaking in praise of a new voucher scheme for school leavers planning to take up training, she said, 'These give real motivation to young people. It is the first voucher scheme we have introduced, and I hope it won't be the last'. When questioned about Mrs Thatcher's speech, MacGregor agreed that 'vouchers were a good idea', but, 'I think that we have a lot more other reforms that we are carrying through'.⁶⁸

MacGregor later described the incident as 'a brief bit of fun in the press. Someone at the Number Ten Policy Unit slipped a mention about vouchers in at the last minute into Mrs Thatcher's conference speech but they never really surfaced after that. The objective of vouchers was being achieved in another way'.⁶⁹ While

⁶² *Education*, 21 September 1990.

⁶³ MacGregor interview.

⁶⁴ *TES*, 29 September 1990.

⁶⁵ Clare interview.

⁶⁶ *Education*, 12 October 1990.

⁶⁷ *Education*, 19 October 1990.

⁶⁸ *TES*, 19 October 1989.

⁶⁹ MacGregor interview.

many on the right, including Michael Fallon, basically agreed with MacGregor's line, as noted by John Clare, the re-emergence of vouchers was more symbolic than realistic, a indirect criticism of MacGregor's stewardship. Others were more direct. Prior to the Conference, the *Daily Mail* had run an article headlined, 'The man betraying Thatcher's children', in which Ray Honeyford said MacGregor should be replaced because he was unwilling to take on the vested interests in education. In an editorial, the paper said a more 'combative spirit' was needed.⁷⁰ With his Conference speech, MacGregor had perhaps one last opportunity to display the 'combativeness' that the *Daily Mail* was calling for. The centrepiece of the speech was the compromise reached between MacGregor and Number 10 over how best to revive the opting out policy. Rather than moving towards forms of compulsion, MacGregor announced a series of measures that were intended to kick start schools into applying for Grant Maintained status. These included allowing all schools, including primary schools, to opt out, along with a series of financial incentives, described by one research team as 'a blatant financial bribe aimed at bolstering the policy's flagging fortunes'.⁷¹ There was, or should have been, enough red meat there for MacGregor to throw to the Party faithful to establish his 'radicalism'. Mike Baker wrote that MacGregor needed to make 'a zealous, ranting attack. . .to re-establish his Party Conference credentials'. To his credit, MacGregor could no more have managed 'a zealous, ranting attack' than 'Kenneth Baker could have shunned a television camera'.⁷² The speech was described as 'lacklustre' and it did not go unnoticed that 'Kenneth Baker, Tory Party chairman and architect of the reforms Mr MacGregor had tried to put into practice, led the standing ovation –and ended it almost immediately, by sitting down first'.⁷³ Nor did the Prime Minister choose to be on the platform during the speech. MacGregor's exit appeared to be only a matter of time, as however much he tried to cling on, there appeared to be too many people ready and willing to jump on his fingertips.

⁷⁰ Baker, *Who Rules Our School?* p. 130.

⁷¹ Fitz et al., *Grant Maintained Schools*, p. 30.

⁷² Baker, *Who Rules Our Schools?* pp. 130-1.

⁷³ *TES*, 9 November 1990.

The following month witnessed headlines such as ‘Education jumps to the top of voters’ worries lists’, and with a 25 point Labour lead, MacGregor was ‘summoned’ to a meeting with Mrs Thatcher. According to Downing Street, the meeting was to discuss the proposed Standard Assessment Tasks (SATs) being prepared by SEAC for seven-year-olds in 1991.⁷⁴ Although the arguments between MacGregor and the NCC had been gaining the greater coverage, the issue of pupil testing had been rumbling along on a parallel course, with the same concerns over ‘unworkability’ coupled with the desire for simple ‘pen and paper’ tests. According to John Marks, who had been one of MacGregor’s new appointments to SEAC the previous September,

The Civil Servants who dominated the Committee (SEAC) told us that it was a legal requirement to test all the statements of attainment that were written in the Act. I read the Act and didn’t think that was right. It was just their interpretation. But the officials – Nick Stuart, David Forrester and Eric Bolton – told me I was wrong and that they had a legal opinion to back them up. I asked to see it but they told me it was confidential to ministers.⁷⁵

MacGregor had already met with members of SEAC to discuss his suggestions as to what he wanted to see included. SEAC’s proposals were sent to him in early November 1990 and he brought these along to his meeting with Mrs Thatcher and her advisers. It was not a success. According to Michael Fallon, ‘All this stuff which we had asked for was coming back at him (MacGregor) and he got bogged down in the testing arrangements. He soon had Brian Griffiths gunning for him. Mrs Thatcher finally lost patience when he was called to her to explain the arrangements and went with mountains of paper’.⁷⁶ It was the last straw. Whether Mrs Thatcher’s dissatisfaction would have, or could have, led to MacGregor’s dismissal is arguable.

⁷⁴ MacGregor claims that he in fact asked for an ‘urgent meeting’ to discuss his concern over the question of vouchers that the Prime Minister had raised at the Party Conference. Suffice it to say that both sides agreed to have a meeting, to which MacGregor brought the proposals from SEAC. *TES*, 2 November 1990.

⁷⁵ Phillips, *All Must Have Prizes*, p. 165.

In the end, it was Geoffrey Howe's resignation that provided Mrs Thatcher with the opportunity to move MacGregor to the post of Leader of the House in a reshuffle that saw him replaced by Kenneth Clarke. The 'listening man' was to make way for the 'lager lout'.

Conclusion

If Keith Joseph was characterised as a 'hapless magician' who forget the second half of the trick, then Kenneth Baker was surely the 'reckless magician', a great showman who was only concerned with milking the applause for the second half of the trick. As a member of the Magician's Circle, John MacGregor really was a magician, but only in real life, not in politics. And it was politics that dominated MacGregor's time at education. In one sense, MacGregor's undoubted technical skills and competence made him the right man, in the right job, but at the wrong time. The space that had opened up between those who devised policies and those who had to implement them became a no-man's land for MacGregor. His inheritance from Baker also included such a level of distrust between the participants that even such an adept listener and conciliator as MacGregor was unable to reconcile the demands from both sides.

It is debatable whether anyone could have done better. Even his critics acknowledged that 'He did have a difficult patch. The job was to ease off and easing the load while also making things work'.⁷⁷ MacGregor's undoing was that he was too dedicated to this narrow approach. Unlike his immediate predecessor who had been consumed by the 'political long game', the bigger picture, MacGregor may have fallen victim to what one historian has described as *The Bridge on the River Kwai* syndrome, 'a narrowing of vision to essentially professional or technical concerns, at the expense of the wider picture'.⁷⁸ The 'wider picture' included his failure to fully appreciate the political dimension of the job he inherited. The

⁷⁶ Fallon interview.

⁷⁷ Bolton interview.

⁷⁸ Burleigh, M. (2000) *The Third Reich. A New History*. London: Macmillan. p. 476.

circumstances in which his successor, Kenneth Clarke, would soon find himself, following the replacement of Mrs Thatcher by John Major, ensured that this was unlikely to be repeated.

CHAPTER 8

November 1990 – April 1992: *The ‘uncomplicated bloke’*

Introduction

Kenneth Clarke’s unambiguous remit from Mrs Thatcher was to ‘get tough’ with the *regulars* who were seen to be subverting the course of the education reforms. In some respects, he did not disappoint. During his relatively brief tenure at Education, Clarke presided over the removal of the heads of both NCC and SEAC, two top ranking Civil Servants in charge of teacher training, and much of Her Majesty’s Inspectorate. The contrast with John MacGregor could not have been starker. According to Michael Fallon, junior minister under both Secretaries of State, ‘John MacGregor was one of the nicest men in politics but he was not a man to sack anybody. In the end he selected himself as Leader of the House. Kenneth Clarke was dripping wet but absolutely ruthless. He had a right-wing gallery to play for and he did’.¹ Despite the contrasts, one thing that the two men did have in common was that Clarke, no less than MacGregor, came to the job with a limited knowledge of education policy. *The Times* would refer to the ‘phalanx of unofficial advisers’² on whom Clarke relied, along with his own instincts, to help fill that space to an even greater extent than other Education Secretaries either before or after. His own instincts were very much what he would have seen as basic ‘common sense’, unconstrained by any knowledge, sympathy or understanding of educational theory or practice. The same could be said of John Major, who replaced Mrs Thatcher within four weeks of Clarke taking up post. This chapter examines the impact of both of these appointments on the already complex and sensitive area of education policy. It was also noticeable in this period that there was less conflict between the *politicos* and *irregulars* about the course of education policy. Why was it that, for perhaps the one and only time between 1979 and 1997, the Education Secretary,

¹ Fallon interview.

Downing Street and the Policy Unit, and other advisers were by-and-large at one? Was this a testimony to the coherence of their approach to education policy? Or was it more a testimony to the power of political ambition?

‘The uncomplicated bloke’

The move to the DES was made reluctantly by Clarke. According to John Clare, who interviewed him soon after his appointment, ‘Kenneth Clarke deeply resented being moved from Health and for the first six months thought more about it than Education. He was bored and angry’.³ At Health, Clarke had resisted the demands of the right for more radical reforms, such as introducing an American style private insurance system. After having fought and won this battle with Mrs Thatcher, Clarke ensured from the start that he would not have to re-fight a similar battle at Education. According to his adviser, Tessa Keswick,

In his meeting with Mrs Thatcher he told her that he was not going to introduce school vouchers. “I’m not going to ask you”, Mrs Thatcher replied. When offered the job he said he would think about it. He thought it was a demotion. I worked on him and convinced him that Education was an increasingly important issue.⁴

² *TES*, 10 February 1992.

³ Clare interview. When Clarke was trying to avoid being transferred to Education, he asked the Prime Minister whom she wanted to appoint at his place at Health. ‘When she told me it was William Waldegrave’, Clarke told one of his biographers, ‘I said, “Marvellous! Ideal! Fellow of All Souls! Born to be Secretary of State for Education!” And she said, “Kenneth, you can’t have an old Etonian as Secretary of State for Education!” On the strength of that I conceded’. Balen, M. (1994) *Kenneth Clarke*. London: Fourth Estate, p. 202.

⁴ Tessa Keswick interview, 7 May 1998. When questioned about vouchers on television the weekend after his appointment, Clarke had intimated that they were not on the government’s agenda. Sensing the lack of agreement on the issue, at Prime Ministers Questions the following Tuesday, Mrs Thatcher was challenged to confirm her support for Clarke’s position. Forever the dog with a bone, she could not quite let something as dear to her heart as the voucher concept go so easily. Quoting her previous utterances on the issue, Mrs Thatcher’s unconvincing reply was that ‘The Secretary of State said almost precisely what I did’. *Hansard*, House of Commons, vol. 180, col. 444, 15 November 1990.

Sensing a disagreement between Clarke and Mrs Thatcher on vouchers, at Clarke's first session at the dispatch box, his Labour shadow, Jack Straw, raised the issue. Clarke's response was forthright. 'The idea of vouchers for schools', he told the Commons, 'is not on the Government's agenda'.⁵ The price, we can only assume, that Mrs Thatcher would have been willing to pay for having the powerful figure of Clarke at Education, was to allow him to run the Department in his own fashion. While there may have been some relief in the education establishment at Clarke's explicit rejection of vouchers, the respite would prove brief. A spokesman for the British Medical Association warned those in education that 'his (Clarke's) idea of reform is to do things his way'.⁶ According to John Barnes, 'Kenneth Clarke has a fast mind. He really was an uncomplicated bloke. There was not much discussion. He listens. Then he goes away and makes up his mind'.⁷ Clarke described his own philosophy in a revealing interview with Walter Ellis in the *Sunday Times*:

I am a strong manager and I'm not inclined to accept sloppy thinking. Ministers are not there to be a pretend surgeon or a pretend vice-chancellor. They are there to impose a political policy and the skills they possess are transferable. In my case, for example, a lot of the principles underlying the reform of the health service apply equally to education. The concern in each case is for standards. The public services are combative – red in tooth and claw - and those who stand in the way of change, whether it be the BMA, NUPE or the NUT, have to be approached in the same manner.⁸

⁵ *Hansard*, House of Commons, vol. 180, col. 471, 15 November 1990. Maybe Clarke had been emboldened by the fact that sandwiched in between Mrs Thatcher's equivocal support of his position, and his own response to Straw, had been Geoffrey Howe's powerful 'conflict of loyalty' resignation statement.

⁶ *Education*, 9 November 1990.

⁷ Barnes interview. His more fastidious colleagues were less than enamoured with Clarke's freewheeling style. The most fastidious, John Redwood, found him sloppy, arrogant and mischievous, 'a lazy scholarship boy who thinks he doesn't need to do any homework'. Williams, H. (1998) *Guilty Men*. London: Aurum Press. Williams, p. 154.

⁸ Ellis, W. 'Man With a Mission'. *Sunday Times Magazine*, 9 February 1992, p. 40.

Omitted from Clarke's list was, of course, the DES itself. Clarke was to tell an interviewer in 1990 that he had 'more trouble on that front in the Department of Education than any other Department I have ever been in'.⁹ His opinion of officials can be gleaned from that of his adviser, Tessa Keswick. 'Working in Education was like walking in treacle', she recalled, 'The Civil Servants were terrible, very cynical and deliberately obstructive. Tim Eggar would almost be crying in frustration while waiting on papers from his Civil Servants. Kenneth Clarke would ask them to say one thing at the Councils but they would change the intent if the instructions didn't suit. Some of them were simply lying'.¹⁰ Part of Clarke's antipathy towards officials was clearly inherent in his political outlook. This was also exacerbated by the fact that officials did not have a productive relationship with Keswick, one of the important avenues to any minister. The opinion of one senior official was that,

Tessa Keswick was disastrous. She probably thinks the same about me. I sat beside her at meetings, listening to her saying preposterous things, simply rubbish, absolute rubbish. She had a very different agenda, very traditionalist, very authoritarian, very right wing and wasn't prepared to listen. I never found any evidence that Kenneth Clarke listened to her at all.¹¹

It is possible that his officials underestimated the influence of Keswick on Clarke, if not necessarily directly on policy. According to Dominic Morris, 'Tessa Keswick was not bright, but shrewd. She judged policy through people and she had a good partnership with Kenneth Clarke'.¹² On reflection, John Caines further highlighted the difficulty of dealing with the bullish and sceptical Clarke: 'Perhaps Kenneth Clarke was badly handled by us. The trick was to never box him into a corner, to never trap him or make him feel trapped. Show him where there was a door but

⁹ Ribbins and Sherratt, *Radical Education Policies*, p. 163.

¹⁰ Keswick interview.

¹¹ Unattributed interview material.

¹² Morris interview. The opinion of John Barnes was that 'although I never quite knew what Ken got from her or didn't get from her, he valued her advice very highly'. Barnes interview.

never look at that door, and never let on you noticed when he walked through'.¹³ However much Clarke may have felt detached from, or unengaged with, the issues he had inherited at Education, the one issue that was inescapable during his time at the DES was the leadership of the Conservative Party.

The Major factor

One of the ironies associated with John MacGregor's travails with Mrs Thatcher was that the degree of influence she was able to exert on the direction of education policy was almost in inverse proportion to her influence in other parts of Whitehall. Working in the Cabinet Office during the late 1980s, Dominic Morris dated the beginning of the end to 1989:

There was a preoccupation with survival, a *fin de siècle* air about the place; Whitehall certainly sniffed it after Anthony Mayer's challenge (in 1989). About 1988-89 Brian Griffiths lost the plot and got enmeshed in the Broadcasting Act, and all that evangelical stuff; the Unit was not strong or influential as it had been. The power of Brian Griffiths waned in 1989 and came to a grinding halt in 1990.¹⁴

Following Geoffrey Howe's resignation, events moved remarkably quickly to place John Major in Downing Street. This brought a significant new variable to bear on education policy. Major's elevation should also be seen in the context of a long line of personnel changes that would affect education policy in terms of continuity and coherence. Starting in May 1989 with a new Permanent Secretary at the DES, this was followed in July 1989 by a new Secretary of State; in June 1990 by a new set of junior ministers; in November 1990 by another Secretary of State; in December 1990 by a new Prime Minister and a new set of advisers accompanying him into Downing Street; and in July 1991 by new heads for both the NCC and SEAC.

¹³ Caines interview.

¹⁴ Morris interview.

Although there was a brief respite until after the 1992 election, when yet another new set of personnel would be put in place, the demands of an already-complex and politically sensitive area of policy were now to be further exacerbated, as education now became inextricably linked with the personal political imperatives of the new Prime Minister as he attempted to establish a domestic agenda for himself.

This was nothing new and a relatively similar situation had already prevailed during 1986-87. What was new was that, as the scale of the task facing John Major was even greater than that which faced Mrs Thatcher, so the scale of intervention increased proportionately. Whatever deliberate degree of calculation Mrs Thatcher may have been guilty of during her ‘asides’ into education policy, these remained relatively ad hoc interventions. Major, however, was the Prime Minister who would deliver set piece speeches on education policy, often setting out new priorities, while deliberately avoiding his *regular* advisers in the DES and elsewhere. Whatever the degree of instinctive antipathy towards education officials Major had brought to his new post, it was certainly bolstered by his closest advisers on education for much of his premiership, John Mills, Nick True and Dominic Morris. In Morris’ opinion:

There was the malice and sheer out-of-touchedness of the DES officials. The Department was activist in support of the liberal establishment pedagogy with a “hands off” view towards everything else. It had an innate ability to bureaucratised everything. The MacGregor and Clarke periods were very dangerous ones indeed. Previously the Civil Servants had been ideologically unsound but powerless. Now they were even more unsound but had their hands on some power.¹⁵

Major’s personal interventions would prove to be on a scale and mode not seen before, leading *Education* to the conclusion that ‘He (Major) has had more to say about education, and has exerted more direct influence on education policy than any other Prime Minister in living memory’.¹⁶ What appeared to remain consistent,

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ *Education*, 12 August 1994.

however, was one of the sources of that influence, with one academic describing ‘the capture of John Major and former Secretary of State for Education Kenneth Clarke by the Centre for Policy Studies’.¹⁷

‘Capture’ was probably an inappropriate description, implying, as it does, some kind of reluctance on the part of the captives. Clarke may have been slothful and simply prepared to regurgitate the nostrums of his ‘phalanx of advisers’ where they chimed in with his own prejudices. But at least he had managed to carve out some kind of political niche for himself during his time at the Department of Health and elsewhere. Not so with Major. ‘One looks in vain for a statement of his political beliefs before 1990’, was the verdict of one study published in 1994.¹⁸ This was certainly the case with education, an area that Major identified early on as one in which he wanted to be involved. In an interview with *The Times* on 30 January 1991, he was keen to talk about education, but readily admitted that his ideas were, ‘not yet fully worked up’. In a telling comment on the confused state of Conservative education policy after the Party had been in power for 11 years, he also stated that, ‘I approach this issue (education) with the instinct that something needs to be done and we are trying to determine exactly what it is’.¹⁹

The undoubted influence of the CPS also gives a clue to the political imperatives that Major had for focussing on education, and also why the CPS was so active in this area during the early 1990s. The issue of Europe, that divided Major from much of his Party during the 1990s, also caused ructions within the CPS between those who wished the Centre to take an independent eurosceptic line, and those who did not want to rock the Party boat. The latter view prevailed. With Major becoming a patron of the Centre, its focus turned very much on domestic issues and education policy in particular. This also provided Major with the opportunity to occasionally provide some red meat to the right of his Party. With the departure of

¹⁷ Ball, S. (1993) ‘Education, Majorism and “the Curriculum of the Dead”’. *Curriculum Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 4, pp. 195-6.

¹⁸ Kavanagh, D. ‘A Major Agenda?’ in Kavanagh, D. and Seldon, A. (eds.) (1994) *The Major Effect*, London: Macmillan, p. 3.

¹⁹ *The Times*, 30 January 1991. Although he would have pressing political reasons to get involved in education policy, Major does appear to have had a genuine interest. Madsen Pirie recalled how ‘John Major’s eyes would light up when discussing education. He was passionate about it, the little guy

the immanent Mrs Thatcher, ‘a fixed point within a kaleidoscope of informal (New Right) groupings’,²⁰ inevitable rumblings soon followed. ‘Mrs Thatcher was the touchstone for reform’, said Balchin, ‘Would the policy be compatible with “one of us”? Would it wear with her?’²¹ From the very start Major could never inspire the same certitude. ‘Sections of the Tory right are grumbling, edgy and suspicious’, reported *The Times* in February 1991, ‘the Tory establishment does not feel comfortable with a Prime Minister proclaiming the classless society. “We do not know who we are,” said one member of the No Turning Back Group’.²² Nor did Major’s ‘big idea’, that of the Citizen’s Charters - a rehash of the *Reinventing Government* model in the United States - prove very convincing in its effort to graft some kind of governing philosophy onto someone who was, transparently, a straightforward political operator. His sympathetic political biographer, Anthony Seldon, described Major as ‘neither a conceptual nor a strategic thinker – rather he was a tactical operator’.²³ Sean Williams, a member of the Policy Unit who would hold the education brief from 1995, further echoed this lack of philosophical anchorage: ‘During the Thatcher era there was a strong framework of ideas. Major’s time was much less structured. Perhaps John Major set far too much stall by policy. It was about politics. He couldn’t persuade people of anything’.²⁴

While Major’s political difficulties only became fully pronounced following the 1992 election, between 1990 and 1992 the most productive ministerial relationship he had was with his Secretary of State for Education, Kenneth Clarke. They had much in common in regard to their views, or lack of views, about education. Each preferred a ‘common sense’ approach, neither had much time for the DES and they also shared a desire and a need to build bridges and establish

made good’. Pirie interview.

²⁰ Harrison, ‘Mrs Thatcher and the Intellectuals’, p. 209.

²¹ Balchin interview. In describing the meetings he convened with other special advisers during the early 1980s, Stuart Sexton described how, although, ‘We worked for our individual Secretaries of State...we all worked with an almost intuitive knowledge as to what Mrs Thatcher would and would not expect’. *The Times*, 17 September 2003.

²² *The Times*, 28 February 1991.

²³ Seldon, A. (1997) *John Major: A Political Life*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, p. 133. Peter Owen certainly felt that during John Major’s time, ‘The opinions in the *Daily Mail* and the *Mail on Sunday* appeared to have an inordinate influence on government policy’. Owen interview.

political credentials with the right of the Conservative Party. For Clarke, this need arose from the strong possibility that Major would lead the Conservatives to defeat at the next general election. In such circumstances, it was entirely conceivable that Clarke himself might be in line for the leadership of the Party. In his article, Walter Ellis had described Clarke as ‘undoubtedly ambitious, calculating and clever’ and noted how since his arrival at the DES, ‘He scattered the opposition with consummate ease and reinforced his position alongside the eternal dauphin, Michael Heseltine, as the top Tory to watch’.²⁵ John Barnes, a friend of Clarke’s, felt that ‘He (Clarke) expects Major to stand down after the next election. But he’s shrewd enough to know that he can’t be seen as the assassin’.²⁶ Clarke himself probably preferred to project his studied air of diffidence and live up to his nonchalant ‘laddish’ image, rather than actively pursue the leadership. His adviser, Tessa Keswick, recalled that, ‘Although he was to the right in education terms, he was extraordinarily unstrategic. I tried to push him to the right but he would deride what he called “pure *Daily Mail* politics”’.²⁷ But Clarke was not averse to allowing others to make the running for him and a clue as to Clarke’s ambitions lay in his choice of Keswick as his political adviser in 1989.

Clarke’s previous adviser, Jonathan Hill, once remarked that ‘Kenneth Clarke doesn’t really need an adviser. He needs a mate. Someone to have a curry and a pint with’.²⁸ Keswick, daughter of the seventeenth Lord Lovat, once married to the fourteenth Lord Reay, and subsequently married to one of the richest men in Britain, Henry Keswick, therefore appeared a strange choice. From Clarke’s point of view, it was an astute choice. Despite their difference in backgrounds, Keswick’s views on education were not dissimilar to his own, ‘very down to earth and very right wing’.²⁹ What Keswick, well connected and instinctively more right wing than Clarke himself, was also able to offer was a personal bridge to the right. Robert

²⁴ Sean Williams interview, 17 October 2000.

²⁵ Ellis, ‘Man With A Mission’, p. 40.

²⁶ Balen, *Clarke*, p. 263.

²⁷ Keswick interview.

²⁸ Kerpel interview.

²⁹ Clare interview.

Balchin felt that, ‘In her own way Tessa Keswick was very good. She was a very good conduit to her Minister and was never afraid to voice ideas from the right’.³⁰ John Barnes thought that ‘Tessa Keswick’s great gift was knowing who to ask’.³¹ After the insularity of MacGregor, Keswick herself recalled that ‘Bob Balchin, Cyril Taylor, John McIntosh all got in touch with me as they had had no access before’.³² With Clarke very much in agreement with much of the advice he would receive from sources such as these, the added bonus of his time as Education Secretary was that he could win plaudits from the right simply by pursuing his own personal instincts.

‘Boot them out’

Ten days after Clarke arrived at the DES, a press release was issued by the Department naming the latest Grant Maintained schools, the first such announcement for almost a year.³³ This was the first signal that Clarke was prepared to diverge from his predecessors in his approach to this area of policy, with Grant Maintained status moving towards being seen, and advocated as, the future norm for state schools, or ‘the natural organisational model’, as he described it.³⁴ Schools run by LEAs, HMI, and teacher training colleges, all became subject to the Clarke world view. ‘He was keen to remove all schools from LEA control’, recalled John Caines:

Deep down I believe he wanted to free up any organisation which had a strong professional or producer ethos. He found the education world was

³⁰ Balchin interview.

³¹ Barnes interview.

³² Keswick interview.

³³ *Education*, 11 January 1991

³⁴ Speaking at the North of England Conference in January 1991, Clarke described how ‘. . .the initiative and creative thinking that I wish to see pervading the whole education service is exemplified above all by those schools that go on to seek and achieve grant-maintained status...the parallel model in the health service is the NHS Trusts...the ‘natural organisational model’. Quoted in Fitz et al., *Grant Maintained Schools*, p. 9. Clarke later referred to impetus of this speech as ‘the need to accelerate the process of moving over to grant-maintained status...My predecessors had been much more cautious, and there was an inclination to regard grant-maintained status as a cautious experiment which would be tries out in a few schools and then eventually, perhaps, moved onto others. I, personally, had no doubt that moving to grant-maintained status was desirable...So I made a

inward looking, that it had lost sight of its purpose and set about breaking up the professional orientation.³⁵

One of the main obstacles to this ‘natural organisational model’ remained that of the ballot which officials had built into the process. ‘If I’d been Secretary of State in 1988’, he told Brian Sherratt, ‘I would not have put in this balloting system’.³⁶ His original instincts were predictably bullish. ‘Kenneth Clarke asked why we were messing about with a ballot’, recalled Robert Balchin, ‘Just “boot ‘em out” he mused aloud. He started to believe me and others and began to suggest that Grant Maintained would be the mainstream way for schools to go’.³⁷ This belief was further strengthened with the arrival of John Major.

After expressing his early desire to have education at ‘the top of my personal agenda for the 1990s’, in May 1991, Major publicly took the lead during the launch of two White Papers dealing with higher education – *Education and Training for the 21st century* and *Higher Education: A New Framework*. His advisers now felt that, to maintain momentum, Major needed to make a big education speech. According to Anthony Seldon, ‘A forum of “sufficient educational gravity” was sought on a par with Callaghan’s choice of Ruskin’.³⁸ The Policy Unit suggested the Centre for Policy Studies and Brian Griffiths, its new head, happily obliged. Major approved, seeing it as a way to build his credentials with the right and showing them ‘continuity with Thatcher’.³⁹ With some initiatives, such as the proposals to ‘hive off’ HMI, held back for the launch of the new Citizen’s and Parent’s Charters, the focus of the speech was to be Grant Maintained schools. This was, reportedly, ‘a particular source of disagreement within the government’, with the Chancellor, Norman Lamont, and the Party Chairman, Chris Patten, in particular giving a ‘frosty reception’ to Clarke’s initial desire to ‘boot’ schools out of LEA control. Major

deliberate point of seeking to drive up the number of schools opting for grant-maintained status...’
Ribbins and Sherratt, *Radical Education Policies*, p.154-5

³⁵ Caines interview

³⁶ Ribbins and Sherratt, *Radical Education Policies*, p.155.

³⁷ Balchin interview

³⁸ Seldon, *Major*, p. 184

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 186

himself felt that automatic and compulsory opting out would be ‘too far ahead of public opinion’ and in flat contradiction to the rhetoric of choice.⁴⁰ Clarke did not push the issue. His Permanent Secretary felt that Clarke had ‘accepted the argument that forcing all schools to opt out was not practical at that time’.⁴¹ Robert Balchin probably had a slightly more accurate take on Clarke’s decision:

As soon as John Major took over we started fighting an election campaign. Although the manifesto group consolidated the idea of Grant Maintained becoming the norm, Kenneth Clarke may have been made ineffably cautious by officials on forcing all schools to opt out. He wasn’t about to pin his colours to a controversial mast, something that might blacken his chances later on.⁴²

In the speech, delivered at the Café Royal, Major promised ‘a special future for Grant Maintained schools. . . (to) smooth the path to Grant Maintained status’ and ‘another new kind of school. . . (with) existing schools to transform themselves into Grant Maintained technology colleges, incorporating the key characteristics of the CTCs’.⁴³ Right-wing *irregulars*, such as Sir Cyril Taylor and Caroline Cox were reported to be delighted, which *Education* took to indicate ‘the degree to which the right wing of the Conservative Party believes they have won the battle for Major’s ear on education policy’.⁴⁴

Education *regulars* were less pleased. The level of distrust and suspicion was such that there was no consultation with the DES on the contents of the speech. The final draft was actually sent to Clarke’s home rather than his office, and only ‘at some point fairly late on it was sent to DES officials for comment’.⁴⁵ John Caines was appalled. ‘The Café Royal speech took us by surprise’, he recalled, ‘It is

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Caines interview

⁴² Balchin interview

⁴³ ‘Education – All Our Futures’. Speech by the Prime Minister at Café Royal, 3 July 1991. London: CPS

⁴⁴ *Education*, 12 July 1991

⁴⁵ *Education*, 5 July 1991

normally taken for granted that the Prime Minister would consult the people whom he pays a lot of money for advice before making a speech on your policy area. It was unusual to find out from the papers what it is you will be doing. It's not terribly good government'.⁴⁶ In the *TES*, Stuart Maclure wrote that 'It really is deplorable that the Prime Minister of this country on a rare excursion into educational policy, should reduce a critically importance discussion to a few tendentious slogans', and he (Major) should 'not consult beyond the coteries of the radical right'.⁴⁷ These were only minor pinpricks. What particularly struck Major was the reaction of papers such as the *Guardian*. In an editorial it praised the Café Royal speech as 'a trenchant diagnosis of what was wrong with the system and as such it pressed the right buttons'.⁴⁸ Major was reported to have been 'flabbergasted' at this response.⁴⁹ It gave him a sense that he was on sure domestic ground when dealing with education policy, scoring points left and right as it were. It gave him even more reason for direct intervention and as his political fortunes ebbed during the 1990s, it was an area to which he kept returning in an attempt to recapture some of this early 'success'.

What the speech also marked was another significant shift in emphasis in relation to education policy. Similar to the National Curriculum, within three years of the Education Bill being passed in 1988, the original policy was now being reworked by new hands who disagreed with the original conception, yet had remained silent when sitting in the same Cabinet as Baker. Indeed, they could have been in a different Party. Gone now, even, was any pretence that Grant Maintained schools had to compete on equal financial footing with LEA schools. In an interview with the *Guardian*, in February Major had said that,

We are concentrating on building up the Grant Maintained sector and when we get successful applicants they are currently enjoying the experience of having the Department of Education looking particularly at their capital

⁴⁶ Caines interview

⁴⁷ *TES*, 12 July 1991

⁴⁸ *The Guardian*, 4 July 1991

requirements. . .If they have gained an advantage, they have gained it as a result of their courage.⁵⁰

Later on, during August, in a letter to the National Union of Teachers he was happy to admit that ‘We have made no secret of the fact that grant-maintained schools get preferential treatment in allocating grants of capital expenditure’.⁵¹ The future did appear bright for Grant Maintained schools and their supporters, even if much of the inspiration behind the new support was from immediate political calculations as much as for educational ambitions. There was also optimism as regards changes on the ‘second front’, that of the National Curriculum. After John Major’s Café Royal speech, Clarke declared that SEAC and the NCC ‘are, as you know, not my favourite organisations’,⁵² and it soon became apparent that he was prepared to apply the ‘boot ‘em out’ strategy to more than just schools.

NCC, SEAC and the ‘happy retirements’ of Graham and Halsey

While the irritation over how the Opting Out/Grant Maintained policy had developed was apparent in Clarke’s actions, at least he was supportive of the policy in general. In dealing with the NCC and SEAC, irritation gave way to impatience and anger. Eric Bolton felt that, after Clarke’s appointment, ‘It soon became clear that he – Kenneth Clarke - was immensely frustrated by having to spend time implementing the policies of a predecessor, in the face of what seemed to him to be the self-interested opposition of “the education establishment”’.⁵³ At the NCC, Duncan Graham was soon under no illusion that Clarke viewed both the NCC and SEAC ‘rather quaintly as the creations of an opposition Government, certainly not his own’.⁵⁴ Clarke himself was typically forthright:

⁴⁹ Seldon, *Major*, p. 187.

⁵⁰ *The Guardian*, 19 February 1991.

⁵¹ *The Guardian*, 7 August 1991.

⁵² *Education*, 26 July 1991.

⁵³ Bolton, E. (1998) ‘HMI – the Thatcher Years’. *Oxford Review of Education*, Vol. 24, No. 1, p. 52.

⁵⁴ Graham and Tytler, *A Lesson To Us All*, p. 109.

I had trouble with them (NCC and SEAC) from the start...The composition of the bodies surprised me... He (Baker) had set up all these bloody specialist committees to guide the curriculum, he'd set up quango staff who as far as I could see had come out of the Inner London Education Authority, the lot of them...I never got the sense out of them that they were wholly committed to the policy they had agreed to deliver by accepting service on the bodies.⁵⁵

When he arrived at the Department, Kenneth Clarke was told by Nick Stuart, by then a Deputy Secretary, that he had 'one man' on each of the Councils. Clarke's show-stopping riposte to this news was "Why have I only got one?" Stuart reportedly replied that the Minister had the Department.⁵⁶ It is unlikely that Clarke was impressed. Within a few days of MacGregor's departure, Clarke went to York for the official opening of the NCC's new headquarters. According to Duncan Graham, 'Clarke listened (to concerns about Key Stage 4), asked questions, and said he could not see any particular flaws in the argument. But I knew from his face he was not going to have it'.⁵⁷ It probably didn't help that Graham was reported to have described the KS4 problem as the Schleswig-Holstein of education.⁵⁸ Whether the new Secretary of State understood the analogy is unclear, but in an interview with *The Times* a few days later, he said, 'It is not instantly apparent that they have taken in what has been said. The curriculum must not become prescriptive and exclude the whole variety of options that people want to exercise'.⁵⁹ In March it was reported that

Mr. Clarke and the DES have also fallen out over the NCC, over appointments and over the latest National Curriculum working group reports,

⁵⁵ Ribbins and Sherratt, *Radical Education Policies*, pp. 152-3, and Balen, *Clarke*, p. 220.

⁵⁶ Marks interview.

⁵⁷ Graham and Tytler, *A Lesson To Us All*, p. 93.

⁵⁸ *TES*, 16 November 1990.

⁵⁹ Graham and Tytler, *A Lesson To Us All*, p. 93.

which he saw as too woolly and too technical. . . Perhaps more seriously for the NCC, Mr. Clarke has been briefed on a day to day basis by his servants at Elizabeth House not York at a time when relations with Duncan Graham have deteriorated and personal abuse has leapt off the pages of their mutual correspondence.⁶⁰

Hinted at in that report was the continued personal animosity between Nick Stuart and Duncan Graham, a factor that meant Graham's position at the NCC was under threat before Clarke took over at Education. By this time, Graham seemed to have only enemies left and personal animosities probably contributed almost as much to his eventual sacking as did professional disagreements.⁶¹ While Graham's position was undoubtedly under further threat from his ambitious and well-connected deputy, Chris Woodhead, it was David Pascall, one of MacGregor's appointees to the NCC, who had quickly become 'the focus for discontent among the Council members'. Pascall had led a delegation from the Council to ministers 'to protest at the arbitrary and cavalier way in which they thought the council was being run'.⁶²

Unlike the situation at NCC, over at SEAC 'there were excellent relations between senior officials'.⁶³ Too much so for Clarke and his advisers. The feeling was that Phillip Halsey, the ex-Deputy Secretary and headmaster, was too much the creature of professional and bureaucratic interests. While Duncan Graham was 'aware of the growing misgivings of ministers', he complained that he was never called in for a discussion of the main sticking points with ministers.⁶⁴ The same could not have been said about Halsey at SEAC where, in Clarke's expression, 'those wretched SATs'⁶⁵ were the subject of many meetings and much correspondence, none of which appeared to have been very pleasant. Clarke presided

⁶⁰ *Education*, 29 March 1991.

⁶¹ The view of some officials was that Graham was simply 'not getting on with the job in good order', and in Graham's personal and professional dealings with his own staff 'there was a breakdown of trust and confidence'. Unattributed interview material.

⁶² 'How King Duncan bit the carpet', *Education*, 19 July 1991.

⁶³ Tate interview.

⁶⁴ Graham and Tytler, *A Lesson To Us All*, p. 112.

⁶⁵ Ribbins and Sherratt, *Radical Education Policies*, p. 156.

over the meetings, allowing his junior ministers the latitude to snap aggressively at the heels of Halsey and his team. As described by Nick Tate, by then Assistant Chief Executive at SEAC, ‘The meetings between Kenneth Clarke and Phillip Halsey were dreadful, depressing meetings. Clarke was disdainful, Michael Fallon was bullying, Tim Eggar was arrogant. They were all visibly contemptuous of everything’.⁶⁶ Halsey had clearly annoyed ministers by ‘not reading the political messages’ he was getting on a range of topics. These included the results of the KS1 trials; on A levels where SEAC seemed to be going in the opposite direction to the Secretary of State by wanting to him to endorse their list of core skills required to broaden Sixth Form studies; and then Halsey’s request that Clarke rethink his demand that the following summer’s GCSE cohort should be penalised for poor spelling in most subjects. These ‘messages’ were further bolstered by the feedback he was getting from his advisers. John Marks recalled how,

At SEAC, Nick Stuart, David Forrester and Eric Bolton would come to the meetings and Halsey would defer to them. I went along to one meeting to the Minister with the SEAC delegation, as a dissident over the Maths tests. I argued that they were nonsense. Clarke picked up the main points very quickly and later described them as ‘elaborate nonsense’.⁶⁷

Aside from Marks, Nick Tate was also ‘very conscious of the key role of Tessa Keswick’.⁶⁸ At one meeting, Keswick raised the point that some teachers were saying that the assessment system was unworkable. According to Marks, ‘She (Keswick) was shouted down by the SEAC council. Halsey tried to calm things down by saying “This was the type of vigorous debate we have at the Council”. There were changes to the Council soon after’.⁶⁹

Whereas Duncan Graham was perceived as going beyond his remit at the NCC, as ministers saw it, Halsey was in the dock for sticking too closely to his at

⁶⁶ Tate interview.

⁶⁷ Marks interview.

⁶⁸ Tate interview.

SEAC. Matters appear to have come to a head during March when members of SEAC presented their pilot proposals to the Secretary of State. The meeting was not a success. 'It was outrageous what Halsey allowed to be presented', recalled Tessa Keswick, 'I don't know why he did it. The tests were given to Kenneth Clarke for approval within three days'.⁷⁰ Clarke himself described how 'These tests were presented to me and my junior ministers as far as I can see with our comments going in one ear and out the other. They were hopelessly over elaborate'.⁷¹ There was more than a strong suspicion that this was deliberate on the part of officials, who, it was feared, were deliberately trying to sabotage or discredit the entire policy. In an interview with *The Times* in the same month, Clarke's exasperation was obvious. 'A short written examination is manageable', he told the interviewer, 'but some people go to ridiculous lengths to avoid them because it has not become proper in modern education. Most schools do not shy away from them as much as some of the experts who advise me'.⁷² Following the meeting, Clarke wrote to Halsey in blunt terms to say that what he had seen was 'not an acceptable model for the future'. He made it clear he wanted 'more straightforward and sharply focused' tests, whose purpose was to provide a rigorous and objective measure of pupils' attainments, not to promote particular approaches to the delivery of the curriculum. 'This was clear in the original specification', he continued, 'which my predecessor agreed for the development contracts. It has seemed to me, however that it has been lost'. In a very public slap down to Halsey and SEAC, the letter was published. In a terse reply, Halsey denied that SEAC had 'lost sight' of the specification and accused Clarke of emphasising a few aspects of the requirements rather than the whole range.⁷³

Here again was the ambivalence and obfuscation that surrounded the introduction of the National Curriculum thrown into sharp relief. The *regular* line, to which SEAC was adhering, remained that provided to John Marks, when he questioned whether all aspects of the Attainment Targets had to be tested and was

⁶⁹ Marks interview.

⁷⁰ Keswick interview.

⁷¹ Ribbins and Sherratt, *Radical Education Policies*, pp. 157-8.

⁷² *The Times*, 23 March 1991.

⁷³ Baker, *Who Rules Our Schools?* pp. 153-4.

told that this indeed was the legal requirement.⁷⁴ This was in direct confrontation with the demands of the *politicos* and *irregulars*. Halsey was in the middle and given his background, he stuck with *regular* line. He could do no other. Nick Tate felt that this very much displayed ‘a lack of judgement. Phillip Halsey was much more thorough (than Duncan Graham), much more methodical but naive. We should have gone earlier to Ministers to explain what we were trying to do. There should have been a political decision’.⁷⁵ This ‘political decision’ over what to test or what not to test would only emerge via Sir Ron Dearing after the boycott debacle in 1993. In the interim, Halsey’s doggedness in pursuing the *regular* line would cost him his position. *Education* was soon reporting that the ‘Axe (was) raised above NCC and SEAC’ and during July it finally fell, in what Clarke later described as the ‘happy retirements’ of Graham and Halsey.⁷⁶ Graham was replaced by David Pascall, ex-member of the Downing Street Policy Unit, and Halsey by none other than Brian Griffiths, newly ennobled as Lord Griffiths of Fforestach.⁷⁷

According to insiders, Griffiths’ arrival transformed the atmosphere at SEAC. ‘To say that a climate of fear exists in Newcombe House would not be an exaggeration’, one is reported to have said.⁷⁸ Almost immediately, Griffiths acted to remove what had been perceived as the undue influence of DES officials on the deliberations of SEAC by banning them from meetings. According to Clive Saville, ‘There was a great row with Nick Stuart when officials were banned from the SEAC but he really brought it upon himself by the way he lectured committees. The right really hated him’.⁷⁹ Griffiths, whose main occupation since leaving the Policy Unit was as International Adviser to Goldman Sachs, did not believe that his job at SEAC required his full-time attention and acted as such, leading even some supporters to later complain that he was ‘part-time and often abroad pursuing his banking

⁷⁴ See Ch. 7, p. 177.

⁷⁵ Tate interview.

⁷⁶ Ribbins and Sherratt, *Radical Education Policies*, p. 157.

⁷⁷ John Marks described how on the day of Griffiths’ appointment, ‘I knew nothing of the changes and went to Newcombe House (SEAC headquarters). The atmosphere was absolutely desperate. Halsey made a venomous speech against Brian Griffiths’. Marks interview.

⁷⁸ ‘The right tightens its grip on education’. *The Independent on Sunday*, August 1992

⁷⁹ Saville interview

interests'.⁸⁰ It was an inauspicious start for the new regime at SEAC, that would soon find itself in the midst of some very testing times. While arguments continued to rumble on at the NCC, after the 1992 general election the public focus shifted very much towards SEAC and the imminent Key Stage 3 tests in 1993.

Cutting the Gordian knot

Despite Clarke's actions over the NCC and SEAC, they were hardly of the calibre that both he and John Major would have wished to trumpet too much as heralding a new domestic policy. What both had been working towards since the start of 1991 would be published as the Parent's Charter in October of that year. The emphasis was on a new form of independent inspection and the provision of information with school reports for parents, the publication of schools results - not just for exams but on other measures such as truancy levels.⁸¹ How the traditional role of HMI was largely superseded by the creation of the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) deserves a special mention, if only to highlight what can be achieved when ideology and policy formation coalesces with the necessary personal and political will, a combination of factors that was so singularly lacking since 1976.

The question over what to do about HMI had been unfinished business for many on the right. Rhodes Boyson regarded HMIs as 'dilettantes on the fringes, who were semi-detached from the Department'.⁸² Bob Dunn described HMI as a 'self-perpetuating oligarchy' that 'constantly recruited from within the profession of people in their own mould. They represented the interests of the providers, not the consumers'.⁸³ Although HMI had escaped criticism from the Nick Stuart penned Rayner scrutiny in 1983,⁸⁴ it was Keith Joseph's decision to publish HMI reports

⁸⁰ Griffiths, *All Must Have Prizes*, p. 166

⁸¹ Major and his team perceived education as such a key area that the Parent's Charter was published after the Citizen's Charter had been launched to amplify the educational components. Hill, J. and Hogg, S. (1995) *Too Close to Call*. London: Little, Brown and Company, p. 98.

⁸² Dunford, *Turbulent Priests*, p. 144

⁸³ *Education*, 17 May 1991

⁸⁴ Instigated by Derek Rayner, Mrs Thatcher's efficiency guru, the reports were meant to examine departmental functions and ask 'radical questions': 'Why is this work done at all? Why is it done as it is? How could it be done more efficiently at less cost?' (Hennessey, *Whitehall*, p. 596) On the central

from January 1983 that left the Inspectorate exposed to political pressure. Not long after this decision, the Thatcher government decided to become much more publicly involved with education policy. According to Eric Bolton, 'All Ministers were greedy for the information provided by HMI but the fact that the reports went public was a real sticking point'.⁸⁵ Prior to this, HMI would have been reporting on a schools system effectively run and organised by other people. As seen in previous chapters, it may have been difficult to say exactly who those other people were, but they certainly were not ministers. As the government increasingly took more responsibility and intervened to an unprecedented extent, then HMI was in the position of reporting almost directly on the effects of government policy, some of which was bound to make uncomfortable reading for ministers.

The twin advent of the National Curriculum and the prominence of parental choice also appeared to make some kind of change in the structure of HMI inevitable. For Bolton,

The main plank of the reforms had been that control and standards could be maintained by better-informed parents. So how could parents know what their child's school was like during the time their child was there? You needed a report for parents on schools. One possibility was to increase the numbers of HMI, which nobody wanted, especially with the powerful suspicion of HMI.⁸⁶

In a speech to the National Association of Inspectors and Educational Advisers during June 1988, David Hancock had given some indications of what was being envisaged. Local authority inspectors and advisers would be expected to play a key

question of measuring the 'value of HM Inspectorate', the authors of the Report, who relied 'heavily on the advice of senior HMI' (Dunford, *Turbulent Priests*, p. 82) simply ignored its brief with the bland assertion that 'We have not found it possible to construct a method for assessing the overall effectiveness of HM Inspectorate in terms of measuring the value that it adds to central government or to the education service as a whole.' Nevertheless, the report did nod towards a door it chose not to open. 'It might be argued', said the authors, 'that in the end the value of HM Inspectorate can only be judged in terms of the results achieved in maintaining and improving standards within the system.' DES (1983) *Study of HM Inspectorate in England and Wales*, London: HMSO, p. 87, p. 89.

⁸⁵ Bolton interview

role in the implementation of government policy. ‘The inspection function’, said Hancock, ‘already developing in many l.e.a.s will need to be given an even higher profile and priority’.⁸⁷ According to Bolton, this would have meant ‘Stiffen(ing) the sinews of the LEAs’ inspectorate with a smaller, national HMI. We were already working on national pilot schemes when Kenneth Clarke cut the Gordian knot of debate’.⁸⁸ Given Major’s, and also especially Clarke’s, antipathy to local authorities in general and the education establishment in particular - this time in the guise of advisers and inspectors - it is not hard to see that regardless of any pilot schemes, any suggestion that included a ‘higher profile and priority’ for them was always going to be a non-runner. While HMI had always liked to see themselves almost at arms’ length from other members of the educational establishment, the introduction of the National Curriculum had inevitably drawn them into a closer embrace with the DES in particular. According to one observer, in dealings with the curriculum quangos, it did not go unnoticed that ‘Nick Stuart and Eric Bolton were hand in glove. They would come up to the NCC on the same train. The days of the independent HMCI were long gone before the advent of Chris Woodhead’.⁸⁹

Whether events would have moved as fast as they did without the domestic imperatives and ambitions of Major and Clarke is questionable. John Hedger, Deputy Secretary in the DES at the time, felt that,

Officials were divided over the abolition of HMI, although there was a strengthening view that HMI should be more judgemental, tougher in their judgements. But it (the abolition) would not have happened as quickly as it did if it had not got caught up in the political fight.⁹⁰

Dominic Morris echoed this view. ‘The debate over the future of HMI was timely’, recalled Morris, ‘Although its abolition was dressed up in the Charter, it was part of

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ *TES*, 24 June 1988.

⁸⁸ Bolton interview.

⁸⁹ Tate interview.

⁹⁰ Hedger interview.

the long-running ideological battle and Kenneth Clarke was up for it'.⁹¹ Indeed, almost as soon as Clarke had taken over, the pressure on HMI had begun to build up with the *irregular* network firing off regular public missives at the Inspectorate.⁹² In May 1991, Clarke announced 'a thorough internal review of the structure and role of Her Majesty's Inspectorate',⁹³ the progress of which John Major instructed he 'was to be fully consulted'.⁹⁴ Although it was reported that the result of the internal review, as well as that of another Treasury led inquiry, had praised the work and efficiency of HMI, the 'real' result could never have been in doubt. According to one account, the final decision was 'clinched' as early as 1 July, in 'a meeting between Kenneth Clarke, Francis Maude and Nick True'.⁹⁵

In September, at the prompting of Sheila Lawlor, John Burchill, chief inspector for the London Borough of Wandsworth had published a pamphlet that advocated a series of competing inspectorates, operating as consultants and licensed by a reformed and streamlined national Inspectorate.⁹⁶ While Clarke reportedly 'walked around for three months with the book in his briefcase before deciding to go ahead',⁹⁷ given the closeness of the CPS to Downing Street during these months, the pamphlet could have been seen more as an unofficial White Paper.⁹⁸ Indeed Burchill's 'proposals' found their way almost verbatim into the Parent's Charter, published in October and the subsequent Education (Schools) Bill the following

⁹¹ Morris interview.

⁹² In November 1991, John Marks complained in the *TES* of the 'Dogs that never bark'. 'In the debate on standards', wrote Marks, 'an important voice is rarely heard, that of HMI... given HMI's enormous privilege, access to every school, classroom and teacher in the country, is this good enough?' (*TES*, 23 November 1990) In March the following year Stuart Sexton followed in a similar vein and challenged the government to 'Take these inspectors to task'. (*Education*, 17 March 1991) In May, several Conservative MPs, led by Dunn and Boyson, signed a motion in the House of Commons calling on the government to abolish HMI and give the Audit Commission the task of monitoring the work of schools and colleges. Dunford, *Turbulent Priests*, p. 192.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Major, *John Major*, p. 249.

⁹⁵ Hogg and Hill, *Too Close To Call*, p. 98.

⁹⁶ Lawlor interview and Burchill, J. (1991) *Breaking the Monopoly*, London: Centre for Policy Studies.

⁹⁷ *TES*, 30 May 2003.

⁹⁸ An October 1991 editorial in the *THES* suggested that 'public debate was in effect conditioned and dominated by the right-wing think tanks...linked to 10 Downing Street 'by threads of steel''. *THES*, 25 October 1991.

month.⁹⁹ Eric Bolton may have been moved to describe the proposals as ‘sinister’,¹⁰⁰ but once the decision had been made, with a united front between education ministers and Downing Street and a clear unambiguous remit, officials had little scope for ‘subversion’. ‘The view was that HMI were the bastions of inward professionalism and needed to be shaken up’, said John Caines, ‘I told Kenneth Clarke of the very high risks but he was someone who had the courage of his convictions and, once instructed, we began to dismantle the Inspectorate’.¹⁰¹ With the equally committed Chris Woodhead appointed as the new HMCI, Ofsted was established and the first inspections took place in 1995 with Ofsted itself likely to remain a fixture on the educational landscape for the foreseeable future.

Conclusion

Like many of Clarke’s initiatives during his time as Secretary of State, it was hard to see the join between political expediency and personal conviction. Clarke’s decisiveness as a ‘strong manager’ was widely admired both by advisers and officials and his tenure marked a significant shift in the public tone and approach to both the National Curriculum and Grant Maintained schools. His impact at Education, as was John Major’s, was certainly judged a success by his erstwhile colleagues on the right. The verdict of Dominic Morris was that ‘Kenneth Clarke was a powerful, determined and smart Secretary of State. In 1988 you could say there had been a score draw with the forces of evil. By the end of Kenneth Clarke’s sojourn, it was perhaps three to two to our side’.¹⁰² Yet this apparent decisiveness and bluster also concealed his weakness as Secretary of State for Education. While

⁹⁹ The decision making ‘loop’ had been so rapid and furtive that when the plans were first unveiled in the Parents’ Charter, it was reported that ‘HMI was astounded. There had been no hint previously from the DES that such radical changes were afoot’. *TES*, 15 November 1991

¹⁰⁰ *The Guardian*, 3 October 1991.

¹⁰¹ Caines interview. The Department has never been fully reconciled to Ofsted. In a recent speech to the National Grammar Schools Association, the current Director General of Schools attacked Ofsted as a waste of time and money. ‘I am not persuaded’, said Peter Housden, ‘that the current Section 10 inspections (regular school inspections) and the public expenditure on Ofsted really delivers for us’. Apparently Mr Housden ‘intended the remarks for a private audience and was not aware journalists had been invited to the conference’. ‘Top civil servant attacks Ofsted’, news.bbc.co.uk, 12 June 2003.

¹⁰² Morris interview.

Andrew Roth's *Parliamentary Profiles* could describe Clarke as 'a rare Minister who can reply without a visible brief', what the *Guardian* saw was someone who was 'treating the job like a barrister – mugged up on the run and then as eloquent and challenging as possible, with a generous sprinkling of sound bites, very little of it underpinned by knowledge of facts'.¹⁰³ Over the questions of the National Curriculum, the verdict of one study was that 'It is difficult to escape the impression that the complex issues raised by the introduction of the National Curriculum and its accompanying tests bored him'.¹⁰⁴ In terms of addressing the underlying problems carried over from Baker and MacGregor, the rhetoric belied the fact that he took neither the time nor trouble to make any sort of real engagement with the issues in his department.¹⁰⁵ As with John Major, other than a superficial brush with some of the more intractable problems, it was clear that much of this energy was expended in pursuing political objectives, rather than making an earnest attempt to deal with the ongoing and deepening policy concerns. 'He (Clarke) successfully diverted attention from the growing problems of the national curriculum and testing', said one commentator, 'but he did nothing to deal with the fundamental contradictions, particularly over testing, which were to cause problems for his successor. He had also driven teachers nearer to the point where even the more moderate of them were ready to resist'.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³ Roth, A. (1988) *Parliamentary Profiles, A-D*. London: Parliamentary Profiles, p. 233 and *The Guardian*, 4 February 1992.

¹⁰⁴ Kavanagh and Seldon, (eds.) *The Major Effect*, pp. 338-9. 'Clarke simply didn't care about the issues', opined one of the Civil Servants who had been at the wrong end of Clarke's 'decisiveness'. Saville interview.

¹⁰⁵ On one occasion, presaging the wonderful later admission when he was Chancellor that he hadn't bothered to read the Maastricht Agreement, when education correspondents had gathered to be briefed about the Alexander report into teaching methods in primary schools that Clarke had requested, they were told, 'Don't bother to read the document. You will find all the bullet points in my press release'. Simon, B. *Education Today and Tomorrow*, Spring 1993.

¹⁰⁶ Mike Baker quoted in Balen, *Clarke*, p. 223.

CHAPTER 9

May 1992- July 1994: '*Crisis, disorder, confusion and mismanagement*'

Introduction

Despite polling evidence to the contrary, almost up to the date of the election, in May 1992 the voters showed that they were still not quite ready for a Labour government. Referring to education in his speech to the first Party Conference after the election, an emboldened John Major pledged to confront those responsible for 'not putting children first. . . Yes it will mean another colossal row with the education establishment. I look forward to that. It's a row worth having'.¹ In the new Major administration the education portfolio was taken over by John Patten. Despite initial optimism over his appointment, Patten managed to preside over one of the strangest and most disastrous interludes in education policy of any era. The consequence was the most public failure of any Minister between 1979 and 1997, with Patten exiting from his only Cabinet post direct to the backbenches and political obscurity.

What was the cause of Patten's meteoric descent? When he arrived at Education, Patten had the distinct advantage over many of his predecessors in that he probably carried the least amount of political baggage. He was not perceived as belonging to any particular wing of the Conservative Party. Nor could much 'significance' be read into his appointment, unlike say that of Keith Joseph or Kenneth Clarke. His predecessor's combativeness and aggression may have angered many in the education world, but this was something Patten could possibly have turned to his advantage, with a fresh approach in an area of public policy in which he himself felt he was a 'specialist'.² Probably in anticipation of such a development, the verdict of the *TES* on his appointment was that 'The education

¹ *Education*, 16 October 1992.

² The former Oxford don told an interviewer in 1994 that 'The one job for which I might have thought myself suited was this one, and I never, therefore, thought that I would ever be appointed to this job because it is axiomatic in government that you don't normally appoint a "specialist"'. Ribbins and Sherratt, *Radical Education Policies*, p. 170.

establishment is likely to find him an affable minister to deal with'.³ In trying to disentangle the sequence of events that led to his departure, there are a number of strands that need to be examined. Was he simply the unlucky inheritor of an unmanageable morass of policies from his predecessors that were neither ideologically coherent nor practically workable? For many of the *irregulars* and *politicos*, much of the blame, particularly for the debacle over the testing regime, could be laid at the door of officials, who, it was claimed, deliberately sabotaged the tests. For the *regulars*, it was the continued, and ultimately, destructive political interference and arrogance by those on the right that was the primary cause. After his sacking, Patten himself was more inclined to suggest that he had been let down by lack of support from John Major and his advisers in Number Ten. The strand that runs through all these explanations is, of course, the contribution of Patten himself, and the degree to which his management of the policies and personalities was a contributory factor both to his departure and policy failure.

'A chemical reaction'

John Patten arrived at Education with the reputation as the longest-serving junior minister in the previous two Conservative administrations. After being elected in 1979, he was the first of the new intake to reach ministerial office when, in 1981, he became a junior minister in Northern Ireland. In 1983, he moved to the DHSS under Kenneth Clarke. In 1985, he moved to the Department of the Environment, before moving again, in 1987, to be Minister of State at the Home Office, where he remained until 1992. After being tipped for promotion and then passed over during several reshuffles, it appeared that Patten's reputation as a 'wet' weighed heavily on his prospects. Yet it had not stopped colleagues of similar disposition, such as Kenneth Clarke and Chris Patten, from reaching the Cabinet. While Mrs Thatcher and her advisers possibly harboured other concerns over John Patten's suitability for promotion, Major's election victory heralded the end of the long wait for 'the nearly man'.

³ *TES*, 17 April 1992.

One of the few brushes he appears to have had with those involved with the education reforms was recorded by Duncan Graham. Graham and his deputy, Peter Watkins, had gone to the Home Office to meet with the Home Secretary, David Waddington and his junior minister to discuss the NCC document on citizenship. According to Graham,

After the NCC presentation Waddington turned to Patten for his comments. After a cringing support of Waddington's views, he complained about the lack of prominence given to car theft in our document!...On the way out, Patten took my deputy, Peter Watkins aside, and suggested that they have dinner together and see how they could sort out that awkward bastard Graham! He picked the wrong man in Peter, but amply demonstrated the lack of sensitivity which was to endear him to teachers a couple of years later.⁴

So it was to prove, and not just with teachers. By the end of his time in office Patten had managed to antagonise just about everybody in education outside a close group of supporters. He had even succeeded in the Herculean task of uniting the teacher unions. Part of this was due to Patten's personal style. According to Lady Blatch, his Minister of State, 'John Patten was misunderstood. He had a throwaway style of speaking and there was a build up of hostility egged on by a bad press. Much of it was self-inflicted. We did a lot of finger wagging. There was a chemical reaction between the Secretary of State and the outside world'.⁵ Elements of this 'chemical reaction' were captured by one backbench diarist:

There's a flouncing quality to John Patten that infuriates his enemies and disconcerts his friends. Everything he's saying about standards in schools and the need for these tests is spot on, but the way he says it is alienating people on all sides. He sat in the tea room today, ramrod back, head held high, being waspish and witty like a camp old thing, not realising that it's his

⁴ Graham, *Education Racket*, p. 180.

⁵ Emily Blatch interview, 28 October 1998.

manner not his policy that's driving supporters away. We should be scoring in this area and we're not.⁶

Patten's 'throwaway style' appears to have been used to disguise a deep sense of insecurity over whether he himself felt up to the job. This, in turn, fed an exaggerated need to prove to everyone around him that he was. Officials who had worked with him in the past found a marked change in Patten when he arrived at Education. One, who had worked with Patten in the Central Policy Review Staff in the early 1980s, felt that, 'At the Think Tank he (Patten) had been engaging and refreshing, but at Education he was vain and insecure and not an easy man to deal with'.⁷ Another official, who had worked with Patten at the Department of Environment, said that he had found him 'pleasant in personal dealings' but 'At Education he was uncharacteristically sneering and defensive in public. He had been kept in the Home Office for a long time after his colleagues had been promoted and this had a corrosive effect on his self-confidence. He was over-eager in his new post and always felt that the eyes of his colleagues were very much on him'.⁸

Arguably, Patten's failure in office was due to the fact that he defined himself almost entirely by what he felt to be other people's expectations, rather than being his own man, never taking the time or trouble to stake out his own positions. The BBC education correspondent, Mike Baker, noted how Patten 'had a habit of stopping in mid-answer and asking, very politely, "Would you mind asking me that question again?" He sometimes did this half a dozen times in an interview. The fundamental problem was that he was trying to regurgitate a memorised answer rather than engaging with the question'.⁹ Some commentators doubted whether Patten was capable of taking a position on anything. One such was John Clare, Education Editor of the *Daily Telegraph*. Soon after his appointment, Clare had met with Patten and had been unimpressed. 'John Patten was a personal and political

⁶ Brandreth, G. (1999) *Breaking the Code. Westminster Diaries*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, p. 166.

⁷ Unattributed interview material.

⁸ Unattributed interview material.

⁹ Baker, *Who Rules Our Schools?* p. 140.

failing of the most extraordinary kind', said Clare, 'He was promoted over his capacity and in no time at all it became apparent that he didn't have a clue. He had no natural grace and showed a crass inability to handle an audience. I met with him for two hours in his room in the Commons after he was appointed and felt like an Oxford don who had spent a two-hour tutorial with a superficially bright student who was unable to grasp the issues'.¹⁰

Although Clare's subsequent article gave away few of his misgivings,¹¹ he would return to the question of Patten's suitability with damaging consequences early in 1993. In the interim, Patten's team at the Department would have had the opportunity to make up their own minds regarding their new boss. Their conclusions were similarly damning. Rather like the 'chemical reaction' between Patten and the outside world, there was similar experience between Patten and his team of ministers and advisers within the Department. The lack of trust and empathy between Patten and his team left them collectively ill-equipped to deal with the challenges they faced during the next two years.

'A rich mixture'

Albeit for differing reasons, Kenneth Clarke was as difficult an act for Patten to follow as Baker had been for John MacGregor. Neither of the Johns ever quite managed to come to terms with their inheritances, although MacGregor was the more fortunate in having been able to leave education with much of his dignity and status intact. At a policy level, the actions of Clarke and Major had altered the nature of the balance between the groups of *irregulars*, *regulars* and *politicos*. While there were always some grey areas in the distinction between these groups, the appointment of figures such as Brian Griffiths and others to SEAC and the NCC, often against the wishes of the *regular* officials and advisers, was always going to be difficult to manage. With education also a relatively more important area of policy for Major than it was for Thatcher, the importance and influence of his *irregular*

¹⁰ Clare interview.

¹¹ *Daily Telegraph*, 12 July 1992.

advisers would also be likely to proportionally increase, creating further discomfort for the new Secretary of State.

At a personal level, Angela Rumbold felt that Patten particularly ‘admired Ken (Clarke). He was friends with him and wanted to emulate him’.¹² The robust, self-confident Clarke was probably the worst role model imaginable for the more fragile Patten. Geoffrey Holland, who would replace John Caines as Permanent Secretary, described the difference between the two Secretaries of State, and the consequences. ‘There are the Kenneth Clarkes of this world who don’t give a tinker’s cuss what anybody thinks’, said Holland, ‘They make decisions and get on with it. Patten was very insecure and was endlessly looking over his shoulder. This made officials very nervous’.¹³ Patten’s mistrust of his officials was also apparent very early on. Peter Owen certainly felt that ‘Kenneth Clarke warned John Patten that the Civil Service would get him, that his cards had been marked’.¹⁴ The combination of insecurity and apprehension with his brief at Education, made for very uneasy relationships between Patten and his senior officials. John Caines described how,

He (Patten) was punctiliously correct in dealing with top officials and he expected them to be on parade at all his meetings. You were left in no doubt about your role and it was made quite plain why you were there, to give advice and not to make policy. He insisted that I attend every meeting. He needed his hand held.¹⁵

Within four months, Caines decided that he had had enough. Although he had only joined the Department in 1989, Caines had worked with four different Secretaries of State. His replacement was Geoffrey Holland, a highly respected and senior figure within Whitehall, with a hinterland of his own outside of the Education Department. With much talk of merging the Education and Employment Departments, Holland,

¹² Rumbold interview.

¹³ Holland interview.

¹⁴ Owen interview.

with his background at the MSC and Employment, was the obvious successor.¹⁶ Someone of Holland's stature would also be able to provide some ballast and know-how for the new and untried Secretary of State. With regard to his new Secretary of State, Holland was wary, if slightly optimistic:

John Patten was a complex character, a very sensitive soul. I knew his reputation for being difficult but had also been told by someone at the Home Office that they had the best discussions about the nature of crime and punishment with John Patten and told me that I would like him.¹⁷

Patten himself was reported to have been elated at Holland's appointment. His junior minister, Eric Forth, was less sanguine. 'Geoffrey Holland had his own agenda', said Forth, 'I was quite surprised that he had been appointed. John Patten was delighted saying that "We have got a 'big beast' to run education". I was astonished and knew it would end in tears'.¹⁸ Relations between the new Permanent Secretary and his Minister soon soured. According to Emily Blatch, it became obvious that 'There were severe tensions between Mr Patten and Geoffrey Holland, who was not the greatest admirer of the Secretary of State'.¹⁹ One immediate source of these 'tensions' was Patten's extreme and, for Holland, tiresome punctiliousness in dealing with his senior officials, something that had already led to the premature departure of one Permanent Secretary. According to Holland, 'There were long, wearying meetings and he (Patten) wanted the Permanent Secretary in his room for

¹⁵ Caines interview.

¹⁶ According to Holland, who described himself as 'an outrider for a merger between Education and Employment', a group of Permanent Secretaries, including Robin Butler (Cabinet Secretary), had prepared a paper which concluded that a merger was desirable. 'Quite a number of us', said Holland, 'were expecting the merger to be announced along with the Cabinet changes straight after the election. There was great surprise when it didn't. I was disappointed the merger did not go through but I wasn't consulted. With Mr. Patten there was no great chance of it going through. Maybe some right wingers felt that Education would be forever sullied if joined to Employment'. John Caines felt that there was a suspicion Major had put the merger on hold partly to try and make a substantive Cabinet post for William Waldegrave who had not been a great success at the DHS. Waldegrave's post-election brief was The Office of Public Service and Science. Holland and Caines interviews.

¹⁷ Holland interview.

¹⁸ Forth interview.

¹⁹ Blatch interview.

every discussion. Policy was for politicians and delivery was for Civil Servants'.²⁰ This was not a role Holland was used to, or was willing to play. Watching from the side, the perspective of Patten's adviser, Cliff Grantham, was that 'Holland was a big cat in the Whitehall jungle. He came with a very clear training agenda and gave undue weight to those issues. He was out of the Department a lot and would often not be at meetings but giving a speech somewhere'.²¹ In Eric Forth's more pithy description, 'He (Holland) was too grand to be the office boy'.²²

Another major source of tension was what Holland perceived to be Patten's lack of character. 'He really was a weak man', recalled Holland, 'and not the sort of person you needed to be strong in two directions: someone to stand up to Number Ten and the Policy Unit on the one hand, and also dealing with all the bodies in a decisive manner on the other'.²³ For someone like Kenneth Clarke, the close interest in his Department taken by Number Ten and the Policy Unit was not seen as a threat, but to be welcomed. For the less-robust Patten, who felt himself under scrutiny after his long 'apprenticeship', it was more of a double-edged sword. As seen in the previous chapter, the work of the Department had already been drawn much closer into the orbit of Number Ten. This trend continued, almost without respite, after 1992. 'During John Patten's time', said one official, 'channels of communication (between Number Ten and the Department) were clogged with traffic in education which was obviously a particularly sensitive area. Consequently he (Patten) didn't have much room to manoeuvre'.²⁴ The key adviser on education within the Policy Unit at this time was Nick True. Whereas Major himself might have lacked strong ideological convictions, this was not case with True. One of his colleagues within the Policy Unit described him as 'an ideologue, not an administrator',²⁵ while officials who had dealings with him found him 'a powerful

²⁰ Holland interview.

²¹ Cliff Grantham interview, 18 February 1999.

²² Forth interview.

²³ Holland interview.

²⁴ Owen interview. Patten had blotted his copybook early on when he argued what the Policy Unit saw as the DFE line on offering the abolition of the Assisted Places Scheme as an economy measure, a move that 'particularly angered Major'. Seldon, *Major*, p. 399.

²⁵ Morris interview.

character with strong personal views (on education)'.²⁶ Patten was well aware of the influence of True, to the extent of almost subordinating some decisions to True's say so. Cliff Grantham spoke of Patten's insistence on 'always keeping Number Ten informed so that nothing would take it by surprise' and 'the sheer effort of keeping Nick True in the loop'.²⁷ This did nothing to endear him to his senior officials who, regardless of political or policy preferences, always like to feel that their minister is able to hold his own among colleagues. Eric Forth described how, 'On one occasion John Patten said he had to ask Nick True at the Policy Unit something. Nick Stuart said, "You don't have to ask Nick True anything. We can do that. You are a Minister of the Crown"'.²⁸ The consequences of Patten's insecurity were often felt. According to Geoffrey Holland, 'We could work for a week on a policy and go home on Friday thinking that the job had been done only to come back on Monday and find that someone on the political network had got at John Patten and everything had to be adjusted'.²⁹ In some ways it was a neat reversal of the times when officials such as Ulrich and Stuart were able to undermine political decisions taken with Keith Joseph and his ministers. With Patten, it was the administrators who found themselves undermined.

Whether Patten needed to be so punctilious in trying to keep Number Ten 'within the loop' is arguable, given the fact that his Minister of State was Emily Blatch, whose presence within the Department could only have exacerbated Patten's nervousness. Lady Blatch was a member of what was described as the 'East Anglian mafia' that surrounded John Major. One of the constituency party activists that had originally selected Major for his parliamentary seat in Huntingdon, their families were close friends and lived near each other. The Prime Minister referred to her frequently as 'my dear Emily'.³⁰ On her appointment, the *TES* described the new Minister of State as 'one of the inner circle of advisers relied on by the Prime Minister, John Major, and she has firm views on the way schools should run...with

²⁶ Owen interview.

²⁷ Grantham interview.

²⁸ Caines interview.

²⁹ Holland interview.

³⁰ Baker, *Who Rules Our Schools?* p. 143.

friends in high places, Baroness Blatch will not be a person to cross'.³¹ Angela Rumbold, who could have been said to have held a similar position under Kenneth Baker, had some sympathy for Patten's predicament: 'When a Prime Minister allies themselves with the Number Two it makes life incredibly difficult for the Secretary of State to run the ship. I would know when to back off from Kenneth Baker. Emily didn't know when to or wouldn't back off'.³² The combination of Blatch's determination and her forthright views would certainly have made her exposure to Patten's prevarications very frustrating. 'Mr. Patten was a most collegiate person', she said, 'He liked shared risk taking'.³³

Within the Department, the tension between the Secretary of State and his junior minister, no more than the tension between the Secretary of State and his Permanent Secretary, did not go long unnoticed. 'Patten did not have a strong ministerial team', recalled Geoffrey Holland, 'with at least one non-team player in Baroness Blatch. She personified the right wing and had considerable access to Mr Major. There was an extremely uneasy relationship between Baroness Blatch and John Patten. It made for an unsettling and uncomfortable berth'.³⁴ Peter Owen described what he saw as 'a "two nations" culture within the Department, one nation represented by Baroness Blatch and the other by Patten. Baroness Blatch was pretty unreasonable in the mould of Mrs Thatcher, tough as steel'.³⁵ Lady Blatch certainly shared Number Ten's views of the Department describing it as 'one of the worst in Whitehall'. 'There was hostility between Mr. Patten and the Department', said Lady Blatch, 'The Civil Servants were sluggish and obstructive. They had an agenda that

³¹ *TES*, 24 April 1992.

³² Rumbold interview. At the height of the Monica Lewinsky scandal in September 1998, President and Mrs Clinton were visiting Ireland. The body language between Bill and Hilary apparently was extremely cool. During one appearance Clinton diverged from his speech to 'salute the women of Northern Ireland'. At that point, one reporter noted that 'Hilary's eyes opened and closed like a lizard's'. (*The Irish Times*, 5 September 1998) This portrays something of the flavour of Baroness Blatch's reaction when the name of John Patten is brought up, or 'Mr. Patten' as she generally referred to him during an interview.

³³ Blatch interview.

³⁴ Holland interview.

³⁵ Owen interview.

was not Kenneth Baker's, not John MacGregor's, not Kenneth Clarke's and not John Patten's'.³⁶

Neither was the 'hostility' just between 'Mr Patten and the Department'. Lady Blatch's forthright views on the place of religion and morality in the curriculum finally brought to a close one of the most distinguished and influential careers at the Department, that of Nick Stuart. The 1988 Education Act had owed much to Stuart's oversight and determination. But his close personal involvement with the policies appears to have left him bereft of sufficient professional detachment in dealing with successive retrenchments, as well as making him an obvious target for right-wing hostility. According to John Caines,

Nick Stuart was an extremely capable man, intellectually very powerful. But people took "agin" him. He argued with great force and tenacity but was very proprietorial about the reforms in which he had been involved and the question was whether he was still fighting Baker's battles or the new Minister's agenda?³⁷

Lady Blatch was typically more forthright:

Nick Stuart had an agenda and we were not on it. He had an enormous hold over staff. He almost was the Department. The crunch came when I was savaged by him in a meeting over the RE curriculum. John Patten said nothing until Nick Stuart had left the room and then he turned to John Caines and said that that must never be allowed to happen again and he (Stuart) was to be moved.³⁸

Patten himself would not have needed much encouragement. He was well aware of Stuart's influence and according to one official, 'There was a progressive lack of

³⁶ Blatch interview.

³⁷ Caines interview.

³⁸ Blatch interview.

trust between John Patten and Nick Stuart with a big blow up over the White Paper. Patten felt that Nick was deliberately rewriting parts of it against the Minister's wishes'.³⁹ Stuart's subsequent departure to the Department of Employment was to be engineered with no loss of face and was announced at the same time as Geoffrey Holland was announced as John Caines' successor.

Aside from Lady Blatch, the other prominent member of Patten's team, which was described by one official as 'a rich mixture of different sections of the Conservative Party',⁴⁰ was Eric Forth, the by then almost obligatory junior minister from the No Turning Back Group. Although he had a reputation for combativeness, within the Department Forth proved to be a great disappointment to his right-wing colleagues, and was perceived as going almost entirely 'native'. As Major's difficulties rapidly accrued after the 1992 election, Forth, at that time an unabashed supporter of Michael Portillo's claims to the leadership of the Conservative Party, would find himself bracketed with John Patten as an unreliable supporter of the Prime Minister.⁴¹ Patten's loyalties may not have been so obvious as Forth's, but they were also in question through his choice of friends. According to Lady Blatch, 'His (Patten's) friends outside Westminster were right-wing writers and journalists like Simon Heffer who absolutely loathed John Major and Major became convinced that Patten was being disloyal'.⁴²

Another consequence of Patten's insecurity was his deliberate aloofness from even the most innocuous contact with the 'education establishment'. His adviser felt that 'he (Patten) was anxious not to fall into the trap of John MacGregor and be seen to be captured by the establishment. He felt that a cosy relationship was unhealthy so he tried to disassociate himself, to show how he was not a soft touch. Perhaps he

³⁹ Unattributed interview material..

⁴⁰ Saville interview.

⁴¹ At the beginning of his acceptance speech for Political Book of the Year at the Channel 4 Political Awards in 2000, John Major took time out to congratulate Forth, who had earlier received his award for Backbencher of the Year. After a slight pause, Major continued with the quip that, it was 'a role for which he (Forth) had been rehearsing for many years'. *Channel 4 Political Awards*, broadcast on 12 February 2000. Forth carried on his intriguing in opposition. Recently, as shadow leader of the Commons, he 'was someone who has struggled to conceal his lack of respect for Mr Duncan Smith' and was the only member of the Shadow Cabinet not to sign a letter in support of his leader. *Daily Telegraph*, 30 October 2003.

⁴² Blatch interview.

tried too hard'.⁴³ While he was avoiding speaking engagements, all contact with the teachers' unions and the educational press, Patten contributed what were described as 'bible thumping' articles for the *Spectator* magazine and the Roman Catholic *Tablet* newspaper. He also appeared in a series of 'softer' features. There was 'John Patten's weekend' for the *Sunday Express*, 'John Patten's cats' for the *Daily Telegraph*, and a photo-story for the *Daily Mail* of him taking his daughter to school and in which he claimed that she would be the 'inspiration behind what happens next in Britain's schools'.⁴⁴ All of these traits eventually contributed to a full-frontal assault on his stewardship of education that appeared in the *Daily Telegraph* in January 1993. After nine months of what he felt was Patten's posturing, John Clare 'went public' with his opinion on the Secretary of State and his record to date. The Education Secretary, he wrote, is beginning to provoke derision among his enemies and cause concern among his friends, he (Patten),

contributes little. . . lacks initiative, does not do his homework and devotes disproportionate energy trying to charm parents. Lacking the energy of a Kenneth Clarke, he has made a series of stuttering starts. . . interspersed with confusion and bad-tempered bickering.

Singled out for criticism was the new Education Bill with which Patten had staked a huge degree of personal capital and in particular its approach to Grant Maintained schools.⁴⁵

'Hamstrung'

The Conservative manifesto for the 1992 general election had promised a bright future for Grant Maintained schools. In a *Guardian* interview before the election, Kenneth Clarke said that his aim was for all secondary schools to have opted out by

⁴³ Grantham interview.

⁴⁴ Baker, *Who Rules Our Schools?* pp. 139-40.

⁴⁵ *TES*, 29 January 1993.

the end of the next parliament.⁴⁶ Following their election victory, the reality of another five years of Conservative rule appeared to set the stage for what the *TES* described as ‘mass opting out’.⁴⁷ It was a policy that had the very public backing of the Prime Minister. After the election, Major held a reception in Downing Street for Grant Maintained headteachers, to which all previous Secretaries of State were also invited. The Prime Minister stressed his attachment to Grant Maintained schools and his support for expanding their numbers.⁴⁸ The opportunity to realise Major’s ambitions lay with John Patten, whose main challenge appeared to devise a new administrative and financial structure to cope with the transfer of schools from LEAs to Grant Maintained status. Reflecting on the chequered history of support by his predecessors for the policy, Patten’s adviser recalled that his boss was ‘in an awkward position. The mechanisms for opting out and dealing with Grant Maintained schools were underdeveloped even though Grant Maintained status was such a flagship policy’.⁴⁹ According to David Forrester, Kenneth Clarke had in mind the idea of Regional Funding Councils, which was also the preference of his senior official in charge of schools, Nick Stuart. In his 1992 Education Act, Clarke had even included the establishment of Regional Committees for Higher Education as a ‘feeler’ for what might later develop at schools level.⁵⁰ Patten was not impressed with the idea. According to his adviser, Patten, already wary of the influence of some officials, felt that Regional Councils ‘were simply reinventing LEAs, creating super LEAs’.⁵¹ Work had already started on a White Paper prior to the election and Patten had been presented with a copy for signing on his first day in office. Patten took it away to add his own preferences, letting it be known to the newspapers that he was writing large chunks of the White Paper himself. It would be a ‘radical and interesting document’, he told the papers, which would be the ‘final piece of the

⁴⁶ *Education*, 20 March 1992.

⁴⁷ *TES*, 24 April 1992.

⁴⁸ Balchin interview.

⁴⁹ Grantham interview.

⁵⁰ Forrester interview.

⁵¹ Grantham interview.

jigsaw', setting the organisational framework for schools for the next ten to 25 years.⁵²

The eventual framework that emerged in the White Paper in July was the Funding Agency for Schools (FAS). Patten's choice, as indeed the Regional Council alternative, was predicated on an assumed increase in the number of Grant Maintained schools in the wake of the 1992 election. The omens had appeared good. Soon after his appointment, his officials had presented him with an optimistic indicator of the growth of Grant Maintained schools, based on previous trends. Patten's Permanent Secretary at the time, John Caines, recalled that 'There did appear to be a gathering momentum of Grant Maintained schools and the extrapolation from that momentum led to the belief that there would be a flood'.⁵³ But, according to David Forrester, the presentation also included the proviso that there were certain specific factors that had led the first wave to opt out that would wane or had already begun to wane, and which meant that the extrapolations might be suspect. Patten only heard what he wanted to hear, with unfortunate consequences. 'Grant Maintained schools could have been presented as a triumph of policy', thought Peter Owen, 'if it stuck with the idea of it as a ginger policy to shake up the others. But it became triumphalist and got caught up in the numbers game, which was the wrong spin'.⁵⁴ For Patten, desire was to be the father of the expectation and, from his first days in office, he had a numerical counter on his desk set to the number of Grant Maintained schools. It was to be adjusted each time another school was went Grant Maintained. As the numbers moved only slowly upwards, and then days, weeks would pass with no movement, Patten's frustration increased in inverse proportion.⁵⁵ Even the appointment of more sympathetic officials within the Department failed to boost the policy. When the unremittingly hostile Stuart was eventually moved to Employment, John Vereker replaced him as Deputy Secretary in charge of Schools. Vereker was described as a 'zealous supporter of opting out and reducing the power of LEAs' and, according to one

⁵² Baker, *Who Rules Our Schools?* p. 145.

⁵³ Caines interview.

⁵⁴ Owen interview.

unidentified former Labour minister with whom he served in the 70s, was ‘a Thatcherite before his time’.⁵⁶ Vereker’s ‘zealotry’ to do his master’s bidding in pushing up the numbers of schools opting out did not impress his colleagues. One fellow official felt that, ‘John Patten was letting through crap schools. There was a total dishonesty about the whole process including the officials involved who became totally taken over by the policy’.⁵⁷ The Assistant Secretary, David Forrester, also become closely involved with pushing Grant Maintained schools, to the extent that he was eventually moved to other responsibilities by Holland’s replacement as Permanent Secretary, Tim Lankester, for being too closely associated with the policy.⁵⁸

Publicly, much of the blame for the lack of numbers opting out was put at the door of the LEAs. According to Lady Blatch, ‘The degree of hostility to GM schools was unbelievable. I offered to meet any headteacher who had lost the ballot. There were many in tears. They had played the game, been neutral and had lost’.⁵⁹ Cliff Grantham also recalled ‘daily reports of campaigns being undermined at a local level’ and suggested that Patten himself ‘was in favour of a phased introduction of all schools into the Grant Maintained sector’. The problem was that he, Patten, ‘was hamstrung by the ballots’.⁶⁰ The ambiguity over ‘parental choice’ paralysed Patten, much as it had done his predecessors. Even the more gung-ho Clarke, prior to the election, had explicitly ruled out legislation compelling headteachers and governors to cut their ties with the LEAs.⁶¹ Whether Clarke would have held this line after a successful election victory, if he had remained in Education, is arguable. Robert Balchin did not think so and felt that John Patten could have done better. ‘Ministers ought to have been more brave’, he said, ‘I was unable to persuade Number Ten not to build policy on other people’s decisions, to do away with the ballot. John Patten

⁵⁵ Forrester interview.

⁵⁶ *Education*, 5 November 1993

⁵⁷ Unattributed interview material.

⁵⁸ Forrester interview.

⁵⁹ Blatch interview.

⁶⁰ Grantham interview.

⁶¹ *Education*, 20 March 1992.

never listened'.⁶² As regards the framework outlined in Patten's 1993 Education Act, Balchin was equally dismissive, rating it no better than the original 'sleight of hand' devised during Baker's time. 'In the end the Civil Servants devised a package to appear to make things easier', said Balchin, 'but it was another sleight of hand. They made it more difficult. Schools now had to be regulated into coming out. What utter nonsense'.⁶³

Patten, ever anxious not to offend possible allies on the right, continued to let it be known that he was not ruling out radical change. At a private conference organised by the Conservative Political Centre, in January 1994, it was reported that he was 'considering pushing all secondary schools into the Grant Maintained sector and scrapping parental votes on opting out after the next general election...counter to all previous ministerial assertions that opting out will be determined by parental choice'.⁶⁴ Yet without unequivocal support from Downing Street for a radical change of policy, Patten never managed to square the circle of leaving one flagship policy, opting out, in the hands of parents and another, the National Curriculum, in the hands of the 'education establishment'. Within the Number Ten Policy Unit, the feeling was ambivalent towards mass opting out. This was not from any ideological standpoint, or even as regards the primacy of parental choice in the process. It was a more political calculation as to what some of the consequences might be. According to Dominic Morris, 'You could not cut schools loose as the infrastructure wasn't there to intervene when the school was going wrong'.⁶⁵ In the absence of anything much other than a strong desire to see more schools opting out, the process simply stalled.

Whether the lead for what would have been a very radical change in policy should have come from Downing Street, or whether the Secretary of State himself should have been 'more brave', is a moot point. After his departure, Patten certainly let it be known that despite the very public promises of support from John Major after his appointment, he felt that that support had not been forthcoming. Yet

⁶² Balchin interview.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ *TES*, 28 January 1994.

Patten's constant need to try and keep Number Ten 'in the loop', instead of taking the initiative himself, only led him into ever decreasing circles. 'The Policy Unit was being unhelpful was a common cry', Dominic Morris remembered, 'But Nick True was holding the whole thing together. John Patten was going to True asking him for support and advice, and then complaining to John Major that there was too much interference'.⁶⁶ Despite the conspicuous failure of Patten to fulfil his overly optimistic rhetoric on boosting the number Grant Maintained schools, this was only one contributory factor to his eventual sacking. By the summer of 1994, in the wake of numerous 'minor' gaffes and the major disaster of the test boycott during the summer of 1993, he appeared a thoroughly discredited and increasingly distraught figure.

Testing Times

When the White Paper, *Choice and Diversity*, was published in July 1992, the main emphases were on the creation of the Funding Agency for Schools and the government's wish for greater emphasis on diversity in school provision, with more schools offering specialisation in different aspects of the curriculum. Despite this oblique reference to the curriculum, the dog that did not bark in the Secretary of State's grand designs, and had not really barked since Patten's appointment, was the expression of any concern or strategy for dealing with the forthcoming round of testing. Nor did Patten probably feel that there were any concerns. He later told one interviewer, in 1994, that 'there was no feeling in the Department from the most senior of officials that we were heading towards the great row that we had this time last year over testing. . .it was a major problem, but it is interesting that no one at the centre was really aware that these great problems were coming'.⁶⁷ Geoffrey Holland, who arrived as Permanent Secretary at the DfE less than three months after Patten,

⁶⁵ Morris interview.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ribbins and Sherratt, *Radical Education Policies*, p. 184, 185. This is backed up by Cliff Grantham's recollections that 'When he started there was no suggestion by officials that there were any problems over testing. Nobody raised their head or anticipated any degree of concern'. Grantham

had a different recollection. 'When I arrived it was clear that we were heading for a bust up on the curriculum which was off-the-wall in terms of realities', said Holland. 'I told John Patten that parents will support the teachers and not the government and the government will not win'.⁶⁸ In the absence of any awareness or recognition in Patten's mind of the 'great problems' that were coming, he had neglected the cultivation of those bodies - teachers, parents and governors - whose support would be necessary to make the testing regime a success. Not only did he not cultivate their support, he appeared to go out of his way to alienate them, entrenching in the process a fatal atmosphere of mistrust and paranoia that had been slowly building up over the previous five years.

If any group may be singled out among those that played a major part in the test boycott, and whom Patten had almost tirelessly managed to alienate, it was teachers of English. The demand for a test boycott would be led by this group, which, according to one commentator, 'had lost over the GCSE, were losing on the national curriculum and now felt the time had come to take a stand'.⁶⁹ Since his appointment, Patten reopened the arguments over the content of the English National Curriculum Orders and had also intervened in the question of the English tests. When Kenneth Clarke had replaced Phillip Halsey with Brian Griffiths the previous year, Griffiths had replaced the Agency that had been sub-contracted to draw up the English tests for SEAC. In the summer of 1992, Patten now rejected their latest proposals and a further new specification for the tests was to be drawn up, a task that was to be undertaken primarily by an inner cabal of recent sympathetic appointments to SEAC. Suspicion over SEAC's political motives had been hardening since John MacGregor had begun the policy of 'parachuting' government supporters onto both the NCC and SEAC. This had continued under Clarke and even more so under Patten, leading the *TES* to complain that 'Every week sees the appointment of another bogeyman to a key committee'.⁷⁰ All of these disruptions and distractions

interview.

⁶⁸ Holland interview.

⁶⁹ Baker, *Who Rules Our Schools?* p. 157.

⁷⁰ *TES*, 18 September 1992. In July 1992, John Marks, already on the SEAC, was appointed to the NCC. Later the same month, John Marenbon, Anthony Pelligrini, and Robert Skidelsky were

were taking place with less than a year to go before the first round of compulsory tests in English. In September, Patten had been asked by the National Association of Teachers of English (NATE) to make the English tests voluntary, which was no more than had happened in mathematics and science the previous year, and considering the continuing changes to the specification, was not entirely unreasonable. Patten refused.

At the start of the New Year, the *TES* was predicting that ‘opposition to national curriculum testing could lead to a showdown with the government in the Spring’.⁷¹ The pace quickened the same month, as an NUT ballot revealed that 90 per cent of its English members were willing to join a boycott. Soon after, all six unions issued a statement condemning the introduction of the English tests. The same month, a member of SEAC English committee, Phil Harding, resigned. Writing in the *TES*, Harding accused SEAC of being obsessed with secrecy, verging on paranoia. The Council had failed to seek advice from its English committee, with members preferring to conduct business in an ad hoc sub-committee, chaired by John Marenbon. According to Harding, ‘SEAC is an extremely political organisation dominated by those whose sympathies lie with the Centre for Policy Studies’.⁷² As the warning signs increased, with groups of headteachers now publicly stating that they would not administer the tests, Patten relented slightly, announcing that the results of the English tests would not be reported in league tables. It was too late. The NASUWT, on the grounds of increased workload, had successfully balloted its members on a boycott of all the national tests, not just those in English. Patten insisted that teachers were bound by the Education Reform Act to carry out the tests and against the advice of many colleagues, encouraged the Tory-controlled London

appointed to SEAC. Marenbon was an English don at Cambridge, writer for the CPS and husband of its deputy director, Sheila Lawlor. Pelligrini was a traditionalist Headteacher in the mould of John McIntosh, while Skidelsky was a Professor of Political Economy at Warwick University who had become involved in the National Curriculum debate during the controversies over the History orders. (*TES*, 17 and 31 July 1992) The attempt to ‘pack’ the key committees was not without its farcical aspects. Skidelsky recalled how he was ‘sounded out’ by Brian Griffiths before the 1992 election: ‘He (Griffiths) didn’t want to be seen to be packing the Council with only Conservatives so I was a good choice in that I was or had been in the SDP. When Griffiths told me of his intentions, I had to tell him that I had just taken the Conservative whip. “Oh dear”, he replied’. Skidelsky interview.

⁷¹ *TES*, 1 January 1993.

⁷² *TES*, 15 January 1993.

Borough of Wandsworth to challenge the union's position in court.⁷³ The eventual judgement in favour of the NASUWT left Patten and his officials 'dismayed'.⁷⁴ Not only was the boycott a legitimate trade dispute, 'wholly or mainly about working load or working hours', but the judge also indicated that teachers were under no legal duty to administer or mark the tests. Under the provisions of the Education Reform Act, this duty apparently belonged to local authorities, head teachers and governors.

With the number of options fast receding and no movement by the teaching unions, Patten then announced a major concession. A 'visibly nervous Education Secretary' announced to the Association of Teachers and Lecturers conference that Easter that there would be a review of the curriculum and testing by Sir Ron Dearing, the chair elect of the new School Curriculum and Assessment Authority, a single body that was to replace the NCC and SEAC in October.⁷⁵ The announcement was welcome news to teachers, even if it looked suspiciously like a *deus ex machina* designed to get the government off the hook. But it also begged the question as to why, if a review was necessary, should the tests for 1993 continue in their present format? Without a coherent answer to this, the boycott remained in place. Despite threats and exhortations from Patten to all and sundry, including full-page newspaper advertisements, the NASUWT boycott was eventually joined by the NUT and the ATL. In May, two of Patten's erstwhile allies on SEAC, Lord Skidelsky and John Marenbon resigned. This was caused, partly one suspects, to avoid charges of ineptitude by association, but primarily due to principled objections to the limited remit for Dearing's review, which did not encompass a complete rethink of the National Curriculum and assessment.

The final ignominy followed on the heels of a disastrous set of election results in May, when the Conservatives only managed to win 27.8 per cent of the vote in the local elections, while also losing the simultaneous by-election in Newbury, the largest by-election defeat since 1972. *Education* described 'the central

⁷³ Balchin interview.

⁷⁴ Owen interview.

⁷⁵ Baker, *Who Rules Our Schools?* p. 161.

problem' for the Party as 'the competence issue'. This was a factor across a whole range of areas, but as regards education policy, 'John Patten did not create most of the problems he has faced but he has completely failed to deal with them'.⁷⁶ The intervention of Downing Street was heralded when weekend lobby briefings to *The Times* and *Daily Telegraph* indicated that the Prime Minister had ordered a retreat over school tests. On 11 May, in a statement to the Commons, Patten announced that tests for seven- and 14-year-olds from 1994 would be limited to English, mathematics and science, with the tests themselves 'streamlined, with some substantial changes to coverage and style'.⁷⁷ For seven-year-olds, the requirements for teacher assessments in Technology, Geography and History were lifted, while the proposed assessments in Music, Art and PE would not be introduced. Other changes included delaying the introduction of tests in History and Geography at 14 and delaying the mandatory tests for 11-year-olds until 1995. By pre-empting much of the ground Dearing might cover, Patten's announcement partly stripped away any pretence that what had happened was nothing less than a humiliating climb down by Patten and the government over education policy.

The runaway train set on its merry way by Kenneth Baker in 1987 had finally hit the buffers. At the controls was John Patten, for whom it was a very personal failure. Following his statement at the Dispatch Box, Dennis Skinner berated the Secretary of State in uncompromising terms. 'Nobody has exuded more arrogance and contempt for his colleagues than he has', said Skinner. 'He has strutted round the Dispatch Box like a puffed-up peacock on heat. Today, he has come in like a bedraggled battery hen that has laid its last egg. His intellectual elitism has overwhelmed his common sense, and the people in the country know it'.⁷⁸ One sympathetic backbencher who also witnessed the Secretary of State's predicament wrote that 'He (Patten) looked wounded and, unfortunately, a little absurd. . .he came away a broken reed'.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ *Education*, 17 June 1994.

⁷⁷ *Hansard*, col. 651, 11 May 1993.

⁷⁸ *Hansard*, col. 656, 11 May 1993.

None to bless

The testing debacle was something from which few of those closely involved really emerge with much credit. As in Roy Jenkins' description of the Lloyd George coalition government of 1919, 'There was something of a miasma about it, so that all who dwelt for long within the atmosphere came out a little polluted'.⁸⁰ Nick Tate felt that the boycott was the result of 'a combination of factors. There were unresolved technical issues, a lack of political clarity, ineptitude and simply the inexperience of managing the exercise'.⁸¹ The overarching issue was, indeed, the lack of political clarity, not only at a micro level in terms the actual tests themselves, but also at a macro level, in terms of policy objectives and priorities stretching back to Baker's time. Ineptitude and inexperience then compounded this lack of clarity and consistency over the pursuit of priorities. This was not just in relation to Patten, but also to the chair of SEAC, Brian Griffiths, whose contribution in some eyes rivals that of Patten's. Griffiths only spent two days per week at SEAC. He was seen very much as 'an absentee landlord',⁸² someone who, according to Skidelsky, was 'away too much and members did not have enough time or knowledge to establish authority over the permanent officials'.⁸³ Griffiths' broad brush interventions from the Olympian heights of the Policy Unit were not necessarily a good preparation for the detailed work required at SEAC. Even his allies felt that, while Griffiths 'had a broad vision', he was 'not tough enough, not good enough at details'.⁸⁴ Griffiths' shortcomings had been pointed out to Kenneth Clarke, who nevertheless went ahead and appointed him to SEAC against all the advice of his officials.⁸⁵ Geoffrey Holland, was of a similar opinion:

⁷⁹ Brandreth, *Breaking the Code*, pp. 171-72.

⁸⁰ Jenkins, R. (2001) *Churchill*. London: Macmillan, p. 345.

⁸¹ Tate interview.

⁸² *TES*, 16 April 1993.

⁸³ Skidelsky interview.

⁸⁴ Morris interview.

⁸⁵ John Caines, Permanent Secretary at the time and in many ways an admirer of Clarke felt that Clarke 'was let down by his judgement of people. Appointments such as Brian Griffiths at SEAC were made against all official advice and were a disaster. He (Griffiths) could not and did not spend the time required on getting the assessment right and it went off the rails. He would not let the

SEAC was a shambles. Brian Griffiths had his head in the clouds in terms of practicalities and realities. His staff was an even more shaky collection of people and there was a terrible game of trying to second guess what they were up to. The Department was having to stick its finger in the air with views varying between no tests will get done at one extreme to everyone will do them at the other.⁸⁶

Within SEAC itself there was increasing disquiet over where the tests were heading. As early as October 1992 there was a strong recognition of the dangers that could arise if the opposition of NATE was not neutralised. Officials, in particular, saw justification in the teachers' complaints that, because of ministerial interference and the changing test specification, there was inadequate time for the teachers to prepare. 'Brian Griffiths was urged to go to Patten and put the case for postponing the tests', recalled Nick Tate, 'but whether he ever put it as forcefully as he should have I'm not sure'.⁸⁷ This view is borne out by the recollections of Patten's adviser, who also pointed the finger at Griffiths. 'John Patten felt badly let down over testing', said Cliff Grantham. 'He had a number of tense meetings with Brian Griffiths at which he expressed his anxieties. John Patten laid his concerns on the line and Griffiths gave assurances. Patten kept going back to get assurances and Brian Griffiths was unambiguous that they (the tests) were going to be fine'.⁸⁸

Griffiths' political 'seniority' and influence within Conservative right-wing circles made for an uneasy relationship between him and the Secretary of State.⁸⁹ Griffiths' was perhaps the one voice whose unambiguous opposition to the tests going ahead might have swung the opinion of Patten. But whatever doubts Patten may have harboured as to the assurances he was getting from his chief examinations

assessors sit on the committees and it had gone off the rails before we knew what was happening'.
Caines interview.

⁸⁶ Holland interview.

⁸⁷ Tate interview.

⁸⁸ Grantham interview.

⁸⁹ According to Nick Tate, 'Brian Griffiths didn't know a great deal, but John Patten was frightened of him'. Tate interview.

adviser, he was probably happier to discount them. 'Emotionally and temperamentally, Patten didn't want to give in', was Eric Forth's view.⁹⁰ The testing issue had coalesced all the personal issues related to Patten's leadership. Peter Owen, who was in the Cabinet Office during the summer of 1993, recalled that 'It was pretty clear that John Patten had been ordered to tough it out and he did it too well. His back may have been a bit too stiff due to the presence of Baroness Blatch'.⁹¹ Patten continued to 'tough it out', even as his allies began to sound the alarm bells. 'We knew the English tests were a mess', recalled John Barnes, 'SEAC by this time was very friendly to John Patten. Over half the Council were good friends of the Party and for him not to take their advice he had to be absolutely crackers'.⁹² Robert Skidelsky was one of those who went to see Patten. 'I said these tests will not run, that he should cancel them and start a review', said Skidelsky, 'By this time he was visibly under great stress. He shouted, "That is defeatist talk. They will go ahead"'.⁹³ Pressure of events later forced Patten to concede a review of the curriculum and testing arrangements, in the hope of somehow saving the tests in 1992. Not only was he thwarted in that hope, but in the process Patten managed to lose support from the right through his sanctioning of the appointment of Sir Ron Dearing as chair elect of SCAA, the combined NCC-SEAC replacement.

The appointment of Dearing, a career Civil Servant and about as apolitical a figure as one could imagine, was a clear rebuff to the right, as well as an implicit criticism of previous appointments. The obvious right-wing choice and someone who appeared to have been groomed for the position, was David Pascall, but a weakened and weakening Patten was unable to press Pascall's appointment, much to the fury of Lady Blatch. 'The appointment of Dearing was unforgivable', said Blatch, 'John Patten was weak. David Pascall had been touched on the shoulder by him (Patten) but he was bullied by Geoffrey Holland. I came as close to resigning as I ever did'.⁹⁴ Dearing's subsequent appointment to head the enforced review into the

⁹⁰ Forth interview.

⁹¹ Owen interview.

⁹² Barnes interview.

⁹³ Skidelsky interview.

⁹⁴ Blatch interview.

curriculum and testing led directly to the damaging resignations of Skidelsky and Marenbon, both of whom had grown weary of SEAC and were happy to return to their respective ivory towers.⁹⁵

Dearing's appointment provided another clear signal that the government, or whoever was in charge, was not going to opt for a radical re-think. As described by Eric Forth, 'Sir Ron Dearing, respected, knowledgeable, consensual, and all of these in unlimited quantities. He was almost impossible to criticise. The trouble was that you never got anything very radical. If you did want something radical you wouldn't ask Dearing to do it'.⁹⁶ With the remit of Dearing's review restricted to advising on the manageability of the testing and assessment structure, Skidelsky resigned from SEAC, accusing the DfE of being happy to 'stage manage' the testing crisis. 'I am disappointed that the committee is of insufficiently high calibre', he said, 'and the remit unsatisfactory . . . The concern is to get the problems of the state system coherently discussed but this has been frustrated by the bunker mentality of the DfE'.⁹⁷

Even at that late stage, Patten could have salvaged something, as the announcement of the review could have been a defining or re-defining moment of the crisis. Geoffrey Holland, who had indeed been instrumental in getting Dearing appointed to SCAA and then in getting Patten to agree to a review certainly thought

⁹⁵ Skidelsky, in particular, had a very formidable intellect but it also made him a very loose cannon in political terms. His support for Conservative education policy was certainly not unqualified. The main quandary remained the imposition of the original Ten level scale from TGAT onto the whole range of subjects, something that Skidelsky as a historian felt was entirely inappropriate. Soon after his appointment to SEAC, Skidelsky and others had attempted to drastically revise the assessment format inherited from TGAT: 'We had a big bash at radically refashioning the TGAT model and I spent the weekend with 6 colleagues in Eastbourne with 2 officials. We pushed the model through committee and through the Council and sent it off to John Patten. We never received a reply. Six months after I resigned Emily Blatch approached me and said she had been looking for my paper on Assessment but no one seems to know where it is. Just goes to show'. Skidelsky interview.

⁹⁶ Forth interview.

⁹⁷ *Education*, 7 May 1993. In one of the many ironies thrown up by the testing episode, Clive Saville, who along with another senior official had been moved from the Department at Kenneth Clarke's insistence in a row over teacher training in 1992, was now brought back in to help with the Dearing review. The irony was not lost on Saville himself, who described his return as 'the man who couldn't be trusted with ministers was brought back to help sort out the National Curriculum'. Nor was he very impressed with the context of Dearing's review which was in effect a life line for the government's whole curriculum policy thinly disguised as an independent review. 'Dearing could have been sorted out in house by Civil Servants', was Saville's opinion, 'It was a product of intellectual dishonesty'. Saville interview.

so.⁹⁸ Like many in the Department, up to that point, Holland had been strongly in favour of pressing ahead with the tests for fear that much of the new ground gained by the Department might be lost. 'I thought the tests might work', said Holland, 'and we were right to press on or else the whole work on outcomes, if not pressed might be dented so severely that it might not recover. The employers were also saying to keep going'.⁹⁹ With Dearing in place, Holland, somewhat belatedly, felt that 'Patten should have pulled back', something that Major and his advisers now began to contemplate. But Patten had simply invested too much personal and political capital in insisting that the tests go ahead to allow himself to pull back. Lady Blatch described how,

At the Cabinet Committees John Major was very well briefed and asked very incisive questions about how this was going and how that was going. I think John Patten felt he had to prove himself, that he could run his own Department and pooh poohed everything saying they were all right.¹⁰⁰

As the political and electoral costs began to mount, and with Patten appearing less and less in control of events, Number Ten finally intervened. The original briefings on the weekend of 8 May appeared to intimate that Major had personally intervened to order a climb-down on the tests which would become 'consultative'.¹⁰¹ On hearing this, Patten reportedly went 'ape' and only 'Back me or Sack me' calls from Patten to Number Ten at 4.00 a.m. the Monday morning resulted in the continued insistence that 1992's tests remained compulsory, albeit, as announced by Patten in the Commons, with 'substantial changes' in future years.¹⁰² That summer, only 150 schools nation-wide administered the tests and completed their returns to SEAC. It was an ignominious finale to an ignominious chapter in education policy.

⁹⁸ 'My main achievement', said Holland, 'was getting Ron Dearing into the frame'. Holland interview.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Blatch interview.

¹⁰¹ *The Times*, 10 June 1993.

¹⁰² *Education*, 14 May 1993; Brandreth, *Breaking the Code*, pp. 171-72; *Hansard*, col. 651, 11 May 1993.

The supreme irony of the entire episode of course was that the government, against which the teachers were taking action, never really wanted to be where they were in the first place. Both Mrs Thatcher and John Major would have been quite content if there had been an even slimmer version of the Dearing compromise in place from the very start. They, in turn, had been thwarted by the representatives of the very people who were now taking action against the government. When Lady Blatch was asked about the slimmed-down curriculum, she replied that ‘This is how we envisaged the system to work. Unfortunately the early architects of the implementation plan introduced too much bureaucracy, too much convolution and the exercise today is all about getting back to where we wanted to be in 1988’.¹⁰³ However much truth there was in this assertion, in political and personal terms it was pretty thin gruel after all that had happened. Interviewed on Radio Four only weeks prior to this, Lady Blatch had been insisting on the importance of the testing regime and its results not just to education policy but also its role in the whole Charter project.¹⁰⁴ ‘I suspect that underlying all this is that teachers and teacher unions do not want public information’, she said, ‘and we must have public information’. In similar vein, Patten himself had been insisting that the tests must go ahead, because, ‘without a testing regime or the publication of results then neither the government not the public not the taxpayer can know what is happening in schools’.¹⁰⁵ It rang uncannily similar to Major’s defence of membership of the exchange rate mechanism in the days leading up to Black Monday. Following the testing debacle and Number Ten’s intervention, the same criticisms are equally pertinent. The *Independent* had described Black Monday as ‘one of the most grotesque days in the history of British finance, a day of crisis, disorder, confusion and mismanagement’,¹⁰⁶ while the Labour leader, John Smith, provided the withering description of John Major as ‘a devalued Prime Minister of a devalued

¹⁰³ Baker, *Who Rules Our Schools?* p. 180.

¹⁰⁴ See Ch. 7.

¹⁰⁵ Baker, *Who Rules Our Schools?* pp. 98-99. Skidelsky told the BBC that the proposals to drop league tables for test results for seven and fourteen-year-olds was like driving ‘a coach and horses through the government’s education policy’. Ibid., p. 178.

¹⁰⁶ *The Independent*, 17 September 1992.

government'.¹⁰⁷ Following the testing debacle, the same description was equally applicable to John Patten, a devalued Secretary of State presiding over a devalued education policy.

Breaking the camel's back

Patten's health broke down in the summer of 1993 and, while he was on sick leave, Lady Blatch took control of the Department. Sir Ron Dearing, meanwhile, shimmied his way through the morass of the school curriculum, something that taxed even his notable composure.¹⁰⁸ Dearing would produce what had been asked for, a slimmed down, more manageable version of what had gone before. Subject orders were to be reviewed, again, while the TGAT model was to be retained, with the number of statements and targets reduced. The greatest sleight of hand, however, was a new interpretation of the assessment requirements as outlined in the 1988 Act. John Marks, who had been rebuffed in Halsey's time when he queried the necessity for testing all the statements of attainment, raised the issue again with Dearing during the summer. Dearing then produced, presumably from a top hat, a letter from John Vereker, the Deputy Secretary in charge of schools and curriculum. 'It is perfectly possible', said the letter, 'to redefine the attainment targets to accommodate a different approach to graduating achievement without amending the primary legislation. . .In short, our advice is that the primary legislation allows a significant measure of flexibility'.¹⁰⁹ In lay persons terms, this meant that not every full stop and crossed 't' on every statement of attainment had to be tested. According to Marks, 'A gasp went around the room at this. They (officials) had come up with another interpretation to allow Dearing to slim the whole thing down'.¹¹⁰ When the Dearing review was published in September, its proposals, described by Skidelsky

¹⁰⁷ *Hansard*, vol. 212, col. 12, 24 September 1992.

¹⁰⁸ On one occasion Geoffrey Holland met Dearing at York train station. 'I never realised what a can of worms this is', Sir Ron told him, 'I've had people shouting at each other!' Holland interview.

¹⁰⁹ Phillips, *All Must Have Prizes*, p. 353.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.165.

as ‘an exercise in neatly balanced compromises’,¹¹¹ were accepted with alacrity by the acting Secretary of State, Lady Blatch.

Patten returned to the Department in the autumn, rested, but apparently none the wiser.¹¹² As regards policies, with the curriculum effectively off limits to the government, certainly for the short term, Patten turned his attention to other areas. While the issue of Grant Maintained schools bubbled along, the area of teacher training now came into the spotlight. The question of where and how teachers should be trained had run alongside the debate over curriculum reforms, with the debate split along similar lines. For those on the right, it was the teacher training establishments who were the villains of the piece. They were left wing, spent too much time on the philosophy and sociology of education and not enough time giving trainees the subject knowledge and practical skills they needed to be effective practitioners in the class room. The preferred solution was a variation of ‘on the job’ training, with trainees spending much more time in schools and less, or ideally, no time in teacher training institutions. These moves were strongly resisted by officials who felt they were wildly impractical. In late 1991, Kenneth Clarke had, in effect, sacked the two senior officials within the Department responsible for teacher training, Clive Saville and John Wiggins, whom he felt were misrepresenting his views to the Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (CATE). When, in September 1993, Patten proposed further changes, including abolishing CATE and setting up a new quango, the Teacher Training Agency, this was already on the back of his earlier proposals for a ‘mums army’ of untrained staff in schools. ‘The only conclusion to be drawn from John Patten’s destructive and half baked teacher training proposals’, fulminated the *TES*, ‘is that. . .having being roundly defeated on the curriculum and testing front in schools, he has returned to the DfE determined to impose his will elsewhere in the system’.¹¹³ It was too much for Geoffrey Holland. ‘Teacher training was the straw that broke the camel’s back’, he recalled. ‘It was a

¹¹¹ *TES*, 24 September 1993.

¹¹² At a fringe meeting at the Conservative Party conference soon after his return, Patten described Professor Tim Brighouse, Chief Education Officer in Birmingham, as a ‘nutter’, which in turn led the Secretary of State being sued by Brighouse.

¹¹³ *TES*, 10 September 1993.

tragedy of distrust, manifested and exacerbated by John Patten and Emily Blatch who distrusted one group of people, the teachers, and one group of organisations, the higher education establishment, who were felt to be running substantial resistance to everything the government was trying to do'.¹¹⁴

Holland resigned in November to be replaced by Tim Lankester, Patten's third Permanent Secretary. It appeared only a matter of time and opportunity before Patten himself was removed. In June, a leader in the *Sunday Times* denounced the government as 'A tribe of exhausted pygmies', with the observation that the Education Secretary had become 'a sad symbol of the little that is right and the much that is wrong with the Major government'.¹¹⁵ In the reshuffle of the following month, the axe finally fell.

Conclusion

On his removal, Patten delivered what was described as 'a terse and brief letter of farewell' to John Major, believing that he had been let down by Downing Street, and letting it be known that he saw himself as the scapegoat for difficulties not of his own making'.¹¹⁶ It is tempting to view Patten's downfall solely as the nemesis of Conservative education policy as pursued since 1979. As seen in previous chapters, there was certainly a sufficient lack of clarity, coherence and continuity in education policy to trip up any unwary Secretary of State. Patten had inherited a series of initiatives that were flawed, both politically and practically, in their conception, something that had been further compounded by the idiosyncrasies and inconsistencies of his three predecessors as Secretary of State for Education since 1988. Their actions, and those of Thatcher and Major, had contributed to the fragmentation of the traditional policy community, leaving the Secretary of State to try and mediate between the competing groups of *irregulars*, *regulars* and *politicos*. Such was the level of antagonism and mistrust between and within these groups, that

¹¹⁴ Holland interview.

¹¹⁵ *Sunday Times*, 29 May 1994.

¹¹⁶ Seldon, *Major*, pp. 477-8.

without firm leadership, it was always likely that the conflict between these various political, bureaucratic and ideological interests, would become as much the issue as the actual policies. It was a difficult inheritance.

Yet there was also no overwhelming or inevitable reason why education policy should have gone so completely off the rails during John Patten's time, without the added specific ingredient of the personality of the Secretary of State. The difficulties he inherited may not have been of his making. The calamitous manner of his approach to them certainly was. There was the almost gratuitous alienation of many in the education world. This alienation started off slowly and gradually gathered pace. There was the early and growing sense of ridiculousness engendered by Patten's self-imposed purdah; the hubris surrounding his trumpeting of *Choice and Diversity*; his denigration of the GCSE results for 1992; his description of the representatives of parent groups who were concerned over the new schools tests as 'Neanderthal' and the Secondary Heads Association's 'antiquated and Luddite trade-union attitude'. Yet even this, in itself, might not have been sufficient cause for the policy failures, had Patten been surrounded by, or able to lead, a cohesive and united Department. It was the sheer disfunctionality of Patten's 'team', the lack of personal and professional trust between almost all of those involved in managing education policy at the time, that combined to push an already teetering set of policies over the edge.

CHAPTER 10

July 1994-April 1997: *Leaden evening*

Introduction

For those who recalled John Major's belligerent speech at the Conservative Party Conference in 1992, his speech two years later, with yet another new Secretary of State beside him on the platform, was noteworthy for 'a stark change of tone and content'. In what was described as a 'humble speech', Major admitted not only that his government had made a meal of some recent education reforms, but that those in education, specifically teachers, were right to have opposed them. 'We have listened', said Major, 'and we've changed our minds'.¹ The most obvious example of Major's apparent new willingness to listen could be seen in the person of his new Secretary of State for Education, Gillian Shephard, and the new tone she had hoped to set for education policy in her announcements made the same week. With a deep intake of breath, the government expressed a desire to take a 'new approach' to raising standards, an approach that would rely on working in partnership with all agencies involved in education, and using the 'best brains. . .the collective talents' of all involved in the education service.²

On Shephard's appointment, the *TES* maintained its record of optimistic, if erroneous, predictions on the arrival of another new Secretary of State. While John MacGregor, of similar disposition to Shephard, 'could make no headway with his reforms against a Prime Minister who was constantly undermining him', Gillian Shephard was 'in any case a more gifted communicator and more knowledgeable about education and will have Mr. Major's backing all the way'.³ It was not an unreasonable expectation, given that Gillian Shephard's appointment must have been a source of personal relief and satisfaction for Major. She was one of the 'East

¹ *Education*, 21 October 1994.

² *Education*, 2 June 1995.

³ *TES*, 21 October 1994.

Anglian mafia', a personal friend of the Prime Minister, and after the unfortunate Patten, someone with a reputation for competence. Given such a promising start, this chapter examines why it was that relations between the offices of Prime Minister and Secretary of State for Education probably reached their lowest ebb than at any time since 1979. Why was it that, once again, those in charge of education policy appeared to be reading from entirely different scripts? In a similar manner to Mark Carlisle's period at Education, why was there an almost palpable sense of drift with regard to education policy?

'Mrs Municipal'

The new Secretary of State's strengths were well known in advance of her appointment. According to Eric Forth, 'Gillian Shephard was very good at stroking people. Her remit was peace in education and she had been appointed to make sure that there was not further conflict with the unions'.⁴ The fact that she followed John Patten made it easier for her to fulfil her remit. Peter Owen, who had been closely involved since the previous January in trying to find a way out of the impasse with the unions recalled how 'Patten made it possible for Gillian Shephard to become the great conciliator. There had been a strange labyrinthine discussion with (Doug) McAvoy, (John) Bangs and John Patten to try and find a way out of the impasse so that neither side would lose face. It was nearly complete when Gillian Shephard breezed in and took all the credit. A small, non-threatening, knowledgeable woman, she wowed the education establishment'.⁵ As part of the final package, Shephard announced that the results of the tests were not be used to construct league tables in 1995. While Shephard was quickly able to use her style and approach to diffuse the testing question, the problem remained that, once the immediate short-term needs had been addressed, previous strengths became weaknesses.

In an interview soon after her appointment, Shephard described how 'We've got to do a lot of listening, we have got to devote a fair amount of time to

⁴ Forth interview.

⁵ Owen interview.

consolidation, to stability, to getting the reforms thoroughly bedded. . .as far as schools are concerned, I believe that we want a period of consolidation and stability'.⁶ Shephard's newly-adopted 'corporate' approach to education policy certainly paid dividends in the short term. According to those *regulars* who worked with her, it was a style with which she was comfortable, and at which she excelled. Some of her political colleagues had their reservations. With a background as an ex-teacher, lecturer, education officer and schools inspector, many on the right needed little encouragement in their suspicions of the new Secretary of State. 'Mrs Municipal' was how Angela Rumbold was heard to describe her.⁷ Rumbold, newly re-radicalised once 'freed' from office, went to see Shephard. Despite the initial successes, Rumbold felt that 'Gillian didn't know what she wanted to do. I urged her to be more brave and said that inviting everyone back in again was a recipe for nothing to get done'.⁸ These doubts were further reinforced, when, in her initial pronouncements, Shephard went further than simply proclaiming 'peace in her time' and appeared to cast doubt on the wisdom of market-driven education philosophy. She told journalists that many parents have no choice of school at all. Reflecting her own experiences of representing a large rural constituency, her view was that, 'If you have to travel 10 miles to the only school or GP in your area, the word 'choice' doesn't have much meaning, does it?'⁹

For a brief period, it appeared that Shephard might provide a different philosophy, or a different vision, for education policy than that of her predecessors. But it was not to be. While John Patten allowed himself to be defined by his support for other peoples' policies, Gillian Shephard was defined by her opposition to other peoples' policies. Reflecting on Shephard's period as Education Secretary, John Clare felt that,

I can see why the original appointment was made but I was dismayed by the lack of initiative and interest she (Shephard) showed. She appeared to have

⁶ Ribbins and Sherratt, *Radical Education Policies*, p. 204.

⁷ Williams, *Guilty Men*, p. 62.

⁸ Rumbold interview.

no idea other than managing the service and didn't appear all that interested in making things better. Maybe she thought it was not possible, that she was too cynical that things could ever be changed.¹⁰

In her defence, Geoffrey Holland, a friend and ally of Shephard, pointed the finger at her predecessors and Patten, in particular. 'Gillian Shephard arrived too late to pull anything off', said Holland. 'John Patten's time so entrenched bad feeling and so infuriated people that only so much healing could be done'.¹¹ A weary cynicism certainly seemed to pervade the actions, or inactions, of Shephard, while her inability to convince her colleagues of her case occasionally spilled into her public pronouncements. 'Of course there is still much that will need to improve in our schools', she told *Education* in March 1996. 'But there is also much that is already good. Sometimes I feel frustrated, as you must see that the critics, the carpers and the sceptics make it difficult to get a positive word in edgeways'.¹²

Yet the core of many of the criticisms directed at her was that there was no constructive alternative vision in her disagreements with Major, such as Kenneth Baker had in aspects of his dealings with Mrs Thatcher. She appeared a competent technocrat, no more. Her metier was at the Department of Employment, which she compared favourably to the DfEE and its officials.¹³ Employment, said Shephard, was 'a hands on department, with excellent officials used to running their own show and devising real solutions for specific problems'.¹⁴ The flip side to dealing with, and preferring to deal with, 'specific problems', was a lack of grasp for the bigger picture. While Shephard may have been successful in defusing the testing issue, she appeared to lack a sense of ambition for her policy area. 'She's smart, very smart, but not a good conceptualiser', one official was quoted saying, 'She's good on the

⁹ *TES*, 9 September 1994.

¹⁰ Clare interview.

¹¹ Holland interview.

¹² *Education*, 15 March 1996.

¹³ The Education and Employment departments were merged in July 1995 to create the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE).

¹⁴ Shephard, *Shephard's Watch*, p. 21.

incremental approach but there comes a moment when you have to take a view'.¹⁵ Whatever their *regular* advisers may have thought of their policy decisions, there remained a strong undercurrent of respect and admiration for ministers such as Clarke and Baker who were willing and able 'to take a view', whether it ran contrary to *regular* opinion, or that of the *irregulars* or other *politicos*. Shephard's apparent pusillanimity left them frustrated. 'There was a great intellectual superficiality about Gillian Shephard', said one official, 'and she was as intellectually dishonest as Shirley Williams. She was someone who wanted to be liked but simply wasn't up to the job'.¹⁶

Despite the antipathy that grew between Sanctuary Buildings and Number Ten, the personal friendship between Shephard and Major remained strong on a one to one level. One adviser described how, 'At their bilateral meetings Gillian Shephard and John Major got on like a house on fire'.¹⁷ This made it awkward for Shephard's critics to attack her directly and personally. Rather, there were 'mutterings'. Examples of this included an anonymous source quoted in the *Independent on Sunday*, that Shephard was 'not scoring runs'. The *Daily Telegraph* reported that Brian Mawhinney, the Conservative Party chairman, was urging John Major to appoint an aggressive right winger to the DfEE, as Mrs Shephard lacked the rottweiler instinct. The *Telegraph* also bemoaned the fact that Shephard had only given 'lukewarm support to Chris Woodhead...the outstandingly brave chief inspector of schools',¹⁸ who was proving to have the rottweiler instinct as HMCI. Another tactic was to attack those close to Shephard, and in particular her special adviser, Elizabeth Cotterell.

The attacks on Cotterell were symptomatic of how internecine the conflicts over education policy had become during Shephard's time. No other ministerial special advisers, not even Sexton at his most active, had been subject to public attacks, least of all by their erstwhile political colleagues. Described as 'The strong woman behind the Shephard throne', Cotterell had been an author for the CPS

¹⁵ *TES*, 5 April 1996.

¹⁶ Saville interview.

¹⁷ Williams interview.

during the early 1980s but had subsequently moved back to the centre ground. Like all good converts, she aggressively disowned her past sins and misdemeanours. ‘Why I ditched the grammars and betrayed the Right’ was the title of one article she was to write.¹⁹ Reportedly viewed with ‘a mixture of awe and suspicion by right-wingers in the Party’, Cotterell made no secret of the fact that she regarded the ‘lunatic right’ as she called them as a top priority educational problem.²⁰ According to Dominic Morris, Cotterell very much ‘reinforced Gillian Shephard’s prejudices and would poison her against various people. The ‘bandits’ club’ (of right-wing advisers) was frozen out’.²¹ The heart of the matter, however, was that while ‘Elizabeth Cotterell stopped any radical ideas, any virus of radicalism, filtering to Gillian Shephard’, Balchin and other *irregulars* in the ‘bandits’ club’ recognised fully that ‘Gillian was pretty well proofed against them anyway’.²²

‘Painfully embarrassed’

The alarm bells for Major and his Policy Unit started to ring quite early on during Shephard’s tenure. What Shephard managed to do, unlike John Patten, was to capitalise on the dislike of her predecessor, to re-build bridges with the education world. The problem for her more radical colleagues was that this appeared to be the end of her ambitions. Dominic Morris, who took over the education brief from Nick True in 1995, remembered how the feeling within the Policy Unit was that, ‘Gillian Shephard had a good year as a conciliator but, by early 1995, the feeling was, “Oh God, we are back with John MacGregor”’.²³ It was from the Policy Unit that most of the new and controversial initiatives that were attempted during Shephard’s time emanated. Peter Owen, who had joined the Department as Deputy Secretary from the Cabinet Office, described how he ‘hadn’t experienced the degree of intervention

¹⁸ *TES*, 14 June 1996.

¹⁹ *TES*, 26 September 1997.

²⁰ *Daily Telegraph*, 13 August 1996.

²¹ Morris interview.

²² Balchin interview.

²³ Morris interview.

by the Policy Unit in other areas'. Partly to avoid some of the misunderstandings that had arisen under Patten, but also as a clear acknowledgement of the degree of intervention and influence of the Policy Unit, Owen 'instituted regular meetings with Nick True, then Dominic Morris and then Sean Williams on the basis that it was much better that they know what is going on and early rather than otherwise'.²⁴ The problem was that while Morris felt that the meetings with Owen were 'a useful touch base', they were also a very mixed blessing, as 'the contents would often be swamped by political imperatives'.²⁵

The first instance when Major's 'imperatives' were to 'swamp' his Education Secretary, was on the question of nursery vouchers. Even as Shephard was wooing the education establishment with her pronouncements at the Party conference, Major had also announced a plan to provide nursery places for all four-year-olds whose parents wanted them. In her response, Shephard, who had little inkling of this new policy proposal, said that this was 'terrific news' and promised to get started right away.²⁶ Yet almost immediately, in an interview with the *Independent*, she appeared to pour cold water on anything radical, suggesting that 'the unwieldy nature' of vouchers ruled out legislation on nursery education.²⁷ The idea of the introduction of a 'voucher' element into the education system, even if on the absolute periphery, held such a strong attraction to those on the right that Major would not be deterred from pushing ahead. The idea itself had been taking shape within the Policy Unit during the previous year, although not everyone in the Unit was supportive. According to Dominic Morris, 'Vouchers were a prize right-wing lunacy cooked up by Nick True and Norman Blackwell (Head of the Policy Unit from February 1995) over the dead bodies of the Civil Servants. It was a nice thing to do to appease the right wing and it played well with the *Daily Mail*. A lot of people thought it would be a vote winner but I was dead against it'.²⁸ Robert Balchin described nursery vouchers as having been 'crept out of the Policy Unit by Nick True and gained

²⁴ Owen interview.

²⁵ Morris interview.

²⁶ *TES*, 21 October 1994.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Morris interview.

enormous support inside the Party. John Major believed in them but not with the iron assurance of Mrs Thatcher. He thought they would appeal to the right, the ‘bastards’. Gillian Shephard was fundamentally opposed’.²⁹

On the prompting of the Policy Unit, early in 1995 the Adam Smith Institute published a pamphlet, *Preschool For All. A Market Solution*, calling for all nursery education to be run by the private sector, supported by means-tested vouchers.³⁰ In March, the author of the pamphlet and founder of one of Britain’s largest groups of private nursery schools, David Soskin, joined the Policy Unit. When asked about his appointment, Shephard’s tight-lipped reply was that it would be ‘helpful’.³¹ Having overtly declared her opposition, Shephard then failed to make a sufficient case for any alternative, leaving herself open to public discomfort and a loss of credibility as the implementation of some kind of voucher became almost inevitable. As Major, in effect, steamrolled his Education Secretary into pushing ahead with a nursery voucher scheme, it was clear to observers that Shephard was ‘painfully embarrassed’ over the issue.³²

It was only the first in a long line of embarrassments, as John Major and his Policy Unit waged a guerrilla war against the DFE in a similar fashion to which the ‘bastards’ were waging against him over Europe. So severe did this become that Peter Owen said that he ‘felt that there was a completely separate political agenda being pursued in opposition to and outside of the Departmental policy’.³³ There was even a number of lesser ‘fronts’ that Shephard had to deal with in this guerrilla war over education policy. John Redwood’s political adviser recalled that, when Redwood was Secretary of State for Wales in 1995, ‘He and I were. . . urged by Nicholas True, the (Policy) Unit’s Deputy Director, to pursue in Wales policies that were presumed to be closer to the Prime Minister’s true views. This would also be a good way of bringing pressure to bear on Shephard. . . . The Prime Minister had created institutional conflict, and signals from Number Ten undermined Shephard’s

²⁹ Balchin interview.

³⁰ Pirie interview.

³¹ *TES*, 7 March 1995.

³² Clare interview.

³³ Owen interview.

authority'.³⁴ Of perhaps more import was the presence of the hawkish Chris Woodhead as HMCi and head of Ofsted. Just as criticisms of Elizabeth Cotterell were indirect barbs aimed at Shephard, so praise for Woodhead fulfilled the same function.

Prior to his appointment, Woodhead was already solidly plugged into the network of *irregular* advisers on education policy. Although his direct links as HMCi should have been through the DfEE, similar to when he was Deputy Chief Executive at the NCC under the ill fated Duncan Graham, Woodhead was not averse to cultivating direct contacts at higher levels and bypassing Shephard. He was 'a regular visitor' to the Policy Unit, where his views on issues such as the publication of league tables of examination results were much more in tune with those of Morris and True than Gillian Shephard's.³⁵ The publication, or non-publication of league tables, had originally been part of the post-Dearing 'settlement' with the teaching unions. But as the next election neared, Major became increasingly desperate to be seen to regain some control of his policy agenda. 'John Major did not want trench warfare in the run up to the election', said Eric Forth, 'but the political imperative ruled against it'.³⁶ The 'political imperative' also meant that the authority of Gillian Shephard was to be undermined as badly as it had been over nursery vouchers. In January 1996, Shephard asserted that the results of the primary SATs would not be published until the tests had 'bedded down', only for the *TES* to report the following month what it described as 'a startling reversal of previous policy'. 'In an apparent concession to the Conservative right-wing', reported the *TES*, Gillian Shephard was forced to announce that the Key Stage 2 SATs taken by 11-year-olds were to be published 'school by school in January 1997'.³⁷ The extent to which Shephard's views on education policy diverged from Major's would be thrown into even starker relief over the question of Grant Maintained schools.

³⁴ Williams, *Guilty Men*, pp. 62-3.

³⁵ Morris interview.

³⁶ Forth interview.

³⁷ *TES*, 9 February 1996.

Making policy by speech

While Shephard was pragmatically opposed to the promotion of 'choice' where none in fact existed, as indicated in her comments about her own constituency, she was also politically wary of the whole issue of Grant Maintained schools. Robert Balchin felt that 'Gillian Shephard was easily persuaded that her predecessor was grossly embarrassed by Grant Maintained schools and she reverted to the view that Grant Maintained schools were only one of the strands of a multi-faceted system. She had no ideological view of the way forward and did not want to endanger herself politically'.³⁸ In the autumn of 1995, it was reported that there was a 'Cabinet split' on the future direction of the Grant Maintained policy with the, by then, old chestnut of all schools being compelled to opt out under 'consideration'.³⁹ Later that same month, Major intervened directly with a speech to Grant Maintained headteachers and governors in Birmingham, where he announced a '12 point plan' to raise educational standards, including new incentives to entice schools to opt out.⁴⁰ After the Prime Minister's speech, Shephard, already 'seething' at the role of the Number 10 Policy Unit, was reported 'to have thrown a full scale tantrum at the way she was being sidelined'.⁴¹

The speech, written by Dominic Morris, was, indeed, a deliberate snub to Shephard, prompted by her inactivity and intransigence. 'With education policy you tended to make policy by speech', said Morris, 'As regards Birmingham, Gillian Shephard might have seen it a bit late'.⁴² By this time, the antagonism that differences over education policy had generated, introduced an element of personal animosity in the relationship between Major and Shephard. The previous summer, when Major's leadership was subject to intense criticism, he had resigned the

³⁸ Balchin interview.

³⁹ *TES*, 1 September 1995.

⁴⁰ These included the relaxation of admission procedures with Grant Maintained schools free to select children; church schools that wished to opt out would no longer require parental ballots; new borrowing arrangements for Grant Maintained schools would be put in place; and schools would be able to retain the full proceeds of any property sales. *TES*, 15 September 1995.

⁴¹ *TES*, 5 April 1996.

⁴² Morris interview.

leadership of the Conservative Party to force an internal election. When potential replacements were being canvassed in the months leading up to Major's surprise decision, a possible candidate who 'was putting herself about a lot, and who let it be known in the months leading up to June that she would be interested in being a compromise candidate', was Major's Education Secretary, Gillian Shephard. Major was reportedly 'extremely surprised' when he learned of his friend's aspirations which came as 'a particular hurt'.⁴³

Whatever the cocktail of motivations behind the Birmingham speech, the issue that would cause greatest internal friction was that of selection, which had been seized upon, almost in desperation, by Major and his advisers, as a potential vote winner. It may have played well with the core Conservative voters, but the problem was, as described by Demitri Coryton, Chair of the Conservative Education Association, 'Selection was rather like unilateral nuclear disarmament for Labour; it appeals only to activists'.⁴⁴ The Conservative manifesto would eventually propose that schools should be allowed to select half their pupils, a suggestion that was derided even by many on the right. The proposal for 'half a grammar school in every town' as it became known, was described by Robert Balchin 'as ill-thought-out a proposition that ever came out of the Policy Unit'.⁴⁵ Such was the acrimony caused by the selection issue that Shephard was later reported to be 'locked in a fierce battle with Downing Street over plans by John Major to allow state schools to select half their pupils by ability'. Relations between the Department and Downing Street were so poor that Shephard was 'allegedly refusing to send crucial paperwork to the Cabinet Office or to the group of advisers working on proposals for the Conservative manifesto'.⁴⁶

Although Major's political biographer, Anthony Seldon, wrote that the Birmingham speech marked 'a nadir' in the relationship between the once-close friends, it arguably had a bit further to go before it actually touched rock bottom.⁴⁷

⁴³ Seldon, *Major*, p. 564, 574.

⁴⁴ *TES*, 9 May 1997.

⁴⁵ Balchin interview.

⁴⁶ *Sunday Times*, 9 June 1996.

⁴⁷ Seldon, *Major*, p. 598.

Two days after the speech, Major had arranged a Political Cabinet at Chequers to discuss the Conservative's Party's policies up to and beyond the next election. All was going well until a message was received before lunch about a damaging education leak. According to the then editor of the *TES*, prior to the meeting, a copy of the Education Secretary's briefing paper, probably written by Cotterell but undoubtedly approved by Shephard, arrived in the offices of the *TES* in a plain brown envelope.⁴⁸ Its contents were uncompromising and the leak was timed to cause maximum political embarrassment. In a direct counter-argument to Major's emphasis on Grant Maintained schools, the paper argued that 'the need to improve standards must not be overshadowed by arguments about the mechanics through which education is delivered'. The clear message to the Prime Minister was 'to stop placing such stress on political initiatives such as vouchers and opting out and concentrate instead on standards and resources in all schools'.⁴⁹ As so often with the Major government, long-term strategy became subject to short-term fire-fighting and Shephard had to return to London to do the tour of television news studios.

The absolute nadir of the personal relations between Major and Shephard was the incident over the issue of corporal punishment in schools. Despite calls from the right, the government had refused to include an option in the 1996 Education Bill allowing schools to restore corporal punishment. It was an omission that Major himself strongly supported. However, during a radio interview Shephard let it be known that she was personally in favour of corporal punishment in schools. On hearing this Major was reportedly livid. Shephard recalled how later on the same day while visiting a school, 'I was actually in mid-speech, and on the point of pulling the cord to unveil the statutory plaque, (when) an overawed school secretary appeared to say that she had Number 10 on the phone'.⁵⁰ Sub-editors had a field day with headlines about Shephard being 'slapped down' on the issue with journalists being briefed by Downing Street. As the story was seized upon as another damaging example of a government at odds with itself, a very public and heavily staged

⁴⁸ *TES*, 11 August 2000.

⁴⁹ *TES*, 22 September 1995.

⁵⁰ Shephard, *Shephard's Watch*, p. 85

rapprochement was arranged at a Grant Maintained school between Major and Shephard for the following day. Although Shephard claimed that the 'visit' to the school by both her and the Prime Minister 'had been long arranged',⁵¹ the recollection of Robert Balchin, who was in Paris at the time of the incident, was somewhat different. 'Elizabeth Cotterell rang me in a panic over the row about corporal punishment', said Balchin, 'and asked me to arrange a "love in" between Gillian Shephard and John Major in a Grant Maintained school. I had to fly back from Paris to make the arrangements and afterwards flew back again'.⁵²

This episode over corporal punishment in some ways marked the end of the very public disagreements between Shephard and Major, partly, one would suppose through sheer embarrassment, but mainly through political necessity. The next election was by then less than 12 months away, and there was a sense that perhaps, something could be salvaged. The change in tone was also marked by a change in personnel in the Policy Unit. Sean Williams took over the education brief from Dominic Morris. Williams' view of relations between Number Ten and the DfEE were not dissimilar to those of his colleagues. 'There was a tension between the Department and Number Ten as education was a particularly active area of policy', said Williams. 'There already had been a lot of intervention due to the weight of policy development in Nick True's time'. Much of the 'tension' was due to Shephard's inaction: 'She was a very shrewd cookie and had lowered the temperature of that policy area. But there were some blindingly obvious things to us that were not being done'.⁵³ Although the circumstances had not altered a great deal, the appointment of Williams marked a distinct change in tone in relations between Major and Shephard. Williams described how, 'My remit was very different to Dominic Morris or Nick True. There was been a lot of friction between Number Ten and the DfEE and my job was to make peace between Number Ten and the Department'.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 85

⁵² Balchin interview

⁵³ Williams interview

⁵⁴ Ibid.

It was a thankless task. Shephard's attempt to woo the right with her stance on caning was as clumsy as her boss's attempts to woo anybody. Even where Major had forced an issue and got his way, such as on nursery vouchers, the actual outcome was almost farcical. 'The real story', according to Williams, 'was how well intentioned policy development got ruined in implementation. With the nursery voucher scheme we ended up nationalising the last year of pre-school education. It was the law of unintended consequences'.⁵⁵ The consequences may have been 'unintended', but for many on the right, the blame lay in the conflict between the Prime Minister and his Education Secretary. According to Robert Balchin, 'Nursery vouchers were the only attempt at radical reform of the Shephard era but it was subverted by Civil Servants in a way that was laughable and we ended up shutting down large numbers of private nurseries creating an area thick with regulations. They (nursery vouchers) were a microcosm of what happened during that time, of the complete and disastrous relationship between the Prime Minister and Gillian Shephard'.⁵⁶

On the issue of Grant Maintained schools, contradictory messages left the numbers slowing almost to a halt. Major could only provide arms length support from Downing Street while no clear push or interest was shown by the Department or by the Education Secretary. With further moves to devolve more money to schools, but no movement on areas other than financial reward, such as the relaxation of the demands for Grant Maintained schools to follow the National Curriculum, LEAs in turn were able to say to schools considering opting out, 'Why bother?' The 1997 manifesto, with its emphasis on selection and grammar schools, largely conceded defeat on any hopes of rejuvenating the original Grant Maintained concept. Its proposals for education, very much focussed on the 'structures' approach, were certainly very radical, but facing an almost inevitable Labour landslide, the Conservatives could afford to go out on a limb. Nobody was listening. 'The pressure for clear blue water', wrote Coryton after the election, 'led us to

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Balchin interview.

develop a policy to distance us from Labour – and it turned out to be the deep blue water in which we promptly sank’.⁵⁷

Conclusion

In his *Great Contemporaries*, Churchill described the trajectory of Lord George Curzon’s career: ‘The morning had been golden; the noontide was bronze; and the evening was leaden’.⁵⁸ Major’s premiership, as indeed his attempts at education policy, had followed a similar trajectory. After he succeeded Mrs Thatcher, an optimistic and increasingly self-confident John Major was able to work closely with his bullish Secretary of State for Education, Kenneth Clarke, to use education policy as one the main planks of his personal political agenda. After some apparent initial success, the problems of education policy, no less than other areas of policy, proved beyond the competence of the Major administration.⁵⁹ Clarke was fortunate in that during his time at education, he was able to share in the brief ‘glad confident morning’ of Major’s premiership. Gillian Shephard arrived very much on the down slope of Major’s political fortunes. It could be argued that the changing personnel of *irregulars* holding the education brief in the Policy Unit marked the tapering ambitions of the Major government. First there was Nick True, the ideologue, who tried to establish some kind of coherent, principled, right-wing approach to the development education policy, something that Major’s other advisers had tried but failed to do. He, in turn, was followed by Dominic Morris, much smaller ‘p’ political, more intent on tactical manoeuvrings. Lastly there was Sean Williams, whose brief was as a conciliator, to see if something, even dignity, could be salvaged from the tail end of the Major administration.

Although the ambition and confidence of Major’s early months was long gone, the political priority remained constant, the ongoing and thankless task of

⁵⁷ *TES*, 9 May 1997.

⁵⁸ Churchill, W. (1937) *Great Contemporaries*. London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1941 reprint, p. 251.

⁵⁹ ‘John Major governing’, wrote Edward Pearce, ‘is like Edward Scissorhands trying to make balloon animals’. *The Guardian*, 10 November 2001.

trying to provide Major with some kind of domestic platform for an upcoming election. Shephard, at best a 'consolidator' in the mould of MacGregor, was confronted by an increasingly-desperate and frustrated Major, who still hoped that further education reforms could provide a distinct political agenda for his increasingly-beleaguered administration. Neither could reconcile the conflict between these positions, leaving Major dependent on his own personal preferences and the advice of a small band of *irregular* advisers.

Gillian Shephard, surveying the ruins of her Party on election night observed, 'There's no doubt that being divided and squabbling amongst ourselves didn't endear us to the electorate'.⁶⁰ 'Divided and squabbling' could, indeed, have provided a suitable epitaph, not just for the Major-Shephard relationship, but for many of those involved during the previous two decades, something that was almost the inevitable consequence of the politicisation and personalisation of education policy.

⁶⁰ *TES*, 9 May 1997.

CHAPTER 11

Conclusion

This thesis attempts to make a substantial contribution to the understanding of education policy during a unique period of educational reform in three important respects. First, it is the first extended study of the period covering the Conservative administrations from 1979 to 1997. In so doing, the thesis weaves together a wide variety of the available secondary documentation, with informed primary oral sources, to provide an original account of the politicisation of the policy-making process, and the consequences of that politicisation on key areas of education policy. Second, its emphasis on the impact of individuals challenges existing accounts or perceptions. Third, it raises questions about the complexity of policy-making at central government level.

‘High frequency activity’

A unique aspect of the period was the nature and scale of the reforms that were introduced. In his 1971 study of Anthony Crosland and Edward Boyle, Kogan echoed elements of Braudel’s observations on different kinds of historical ‘time’. Ministers, wrote Kogan, bring with them ‘high frequency activity which can initiate, change, strengthen or condemn a whole policy’, while the making of policy was continuously in the hands of the Civil Servants who create ‘low frequency policy waves’.¹ When one examines what Kogan describes as ‘the main events’ of Crosland’s and Boyle’s time at education, their ‘high frequency’ activities, we are left primarily with a list of announcements and anonymous incremental initiatives. These emerged from within the existing policy community, and, arguably, did not greatly disturb or threaten the previous drift of educational developments.² A chronicle of the ‘main events’ from, say, 1986 to 1994 would tell a very different tale. This would not just be in terms of their scope and ambition, but also with regard to how they were developed and

¹ Kogan, *Politics of Education*, p. 42.

² For Boyle’s and Crosland’s ‘main events’ see *ibid.*, pp. 66-68 and pp. 146-7.

implemented, and the impact of the individuals associated with them. Whatever their long-term impact on the course of education policy, the three distinct groupings that emerged – the *politicos*, the *regulars* and the *irregulars* – certainly managed to disturb the ‘tides of history’ in ways that are incomparable to previous periods of education reform.

In focussing on particular aspects or qualities of politics and personalities and their impact on policy, this thesis provides a powerful corrective to what Stephen Ball described as ‘those analyses of policy and policy-making that rationalize and reify policy or look for simple relationships between ideology and structure’.³ Too often, as described by McPherson and Raab, individual policy-makers have been portrayed as ‘caricature creatures of a “role”, or an “interest”, or some other abstraction’.⁴ An example of this may be found in how Ball himself deconstructed the replies of some of his interviewees for his *Politics and Policy Making* and subsequent articles in Halpin and Troyna, (eds.) *Researching Educational Policy* and Walford (ed.) *Researching the Powerful in Education*. The actions, or inter-actions, of individuals are viewed and analysed through the prism of policies or assumed ideological positions. This thesis explores the reverse relationship, where the course of policies is not studied through ‘abstract generalities’ but through the concrete experiences of individuals’,⁵ the personal and political contingencies they faced.

A typical example of this was the experience of John Patten, whose policy failures can be interpreted as the culmination of misplaced ideological hubris and dogmatism. Yet, on examining his relationships with colleagues, different explanations can be suggested. When Geoffrey Holland, his most experienced and senior Civil Servant resigned, it was reported that the Secretary of State and his Permanent Secretary had ‘not enjoyed a close relationship’.⁶ While both men may have had genuine policy differences, the primary reasons

³ Ball, ‘Political interviews and the politics of interviewing’, p. 106. Ball’s comment was a reflection on how Keith Joseph, whom he interviewed for *Politics and Policy Making in Education*, had responded to a question on policy-making with ‘a powerful image of policy...resting on particular qualities of personality and things like courage and instinct’. As an interesting aside to the different approaches to broadly similar topics, Keith Joseph’s response did not make it into Ball’s finished text, which was based around the theories of writers such as Althusser and Foucault, but was reproduced in the later article.

⁴ McPherson and Raab, *Governing Education*, p. xiii.

⁵ Ibid., p. x.

⁶ *TES*, 19 November 1993.

why they did not enjoy a 'close relationship', and the consequences of this on policy, were over questions of professional status and power relationships within the Department. A similar conclusion could be reached when examining the perception that Kenneth Baker was swept along by, or merely a cipher for an education agenda set elsewhere; or whether John Major and Kenneth Clark were 'captured' by a right-wing agenda. Politicisation of policy was simply not confined to the injection of a highly-ideological element into the character of policies. Within the new politicised 'space' that emerged from 1976 onwards to displace the traditional policy community, policy became increasingly subject to the vagaries of personal and political, as well as ideological, ambitions, with the former more often than not winning out over the latter. It was the conflict and mistrust generated over issues such as these that was the determining factor in the success or otherwise of policy issues.

It is not difficult to trace the gradual, albeit largely submerged, encroachment of politics and politicisation into the area of education policy, which culminated in the very public eruption from 1986. The resurgence of right-wing thought in education and elsewhere was part of a broader international rejection of the post-war social democratic landscape. While some of the initial criticisms may have been based more on instinct than on hard evidence, the right had tapped into some real, and some imagined, weaknesses and discontent relating to the schools system. During the 1970s it was increasingly not just instinct, nor anecdote, nor ideological hostility that led to a questioning of the system. The blunt conclusion of the HMI report on secondary schools in 1979 was that 'Thirty five years after the 1944 Act the education system is still seeking to give effect to the commitment of that Act to secondary education for all, suited to the age aptitude and ability of every pupil'.⁷ As the divisions continued to widen between the traditional partners in the policy-making process, but without any effective means to resolve these differences, it was unlikely that the political detachment that characterised much of the post-war period could have been sustained for much longer. As it was, the breakdown of the post-war political settlement in general was hastened by a resurgent strand of Conservative politics,

⁷ DES, *Aspects of Secondary Education*, p. 265.

one that was intensely political or ideological in its outlook, and from which the world of education could not have indefinitely remained aloof.

Yet the process by which the rhetoric of the New Right became translated into policy proposals throws into relief just how important was the role of committed individuals or groups. This was particularly true for the neo-liberal or market aspects of the education reforms. One member of the IEA recalled, how, during much of the post-war period, 'To argue for the use of the market (or for the price mechanism as it was more usually called) was to put yourself outside serious discussion into an archaic and isolated no-man's land where, incidentally, few British academics were to be found, even as explorers'.⁸ With regard to the introduction of market forces in education, as Robert Balchin has recalled, during the 1960s and 1970s, this was felt 'to be beyond stupidity'.⁹ Yet, by late 1986, just such a set of policy proposals, that largely emanated from a small group of neo-liberals, were poised to take their place in the 1987 Conservative manifesto. Although Ball suggests that 'Joseph provided legitimation within the apparatus of the Conservative Party of the radical-right think-tanks', thus providing his successor, Kenneth Baker, with 'possibilities. . .very different from those faced by previous incoming Secretaries', the irony was that it was very much Joseph's lack of practical response when Secretary of State for Education to that self same radical-right agenda, which provided the impetus for more radical policies to be developed.¹⁰

While the neo-liberal proposals were clearly also part of the *zeitgeist* for free-market influenced reforms, they were also formulated in reaction to the unwillingness or inability of the 'partners' in the extant policy process to address the concerns that were raised about the schools system, independent of any right-wing critique. In McPherson and Raab's study of the Scottish education system, they were able to describe the testimonies of their interviewees as constituting, among other things, a unique set of perspectives 'on the way in which a wider "policy community" was formed and maintained'.¹¹ Much of the testimony in

⁸ Quoted in Salter and Tapper, *Power and Politics*, p. 169.

⁹ Balchin interview.

¹⁰ Ball, 'Researching Inside the State', pp. 113-114. Whether Baker in his turn found this legitimation of the radical-right think tanks as offering him additional 'possibilities' in a positive sense is also a moot point. See Ch.5, pp. 111-118.

¹¹ McPherson and Raab, *Governing Education*, p. xiii.

this study details how the wider 'policy community' south of the border was fractured, primarily through the intervention of the *politicos* such as Mrs Thatcher and *irregulars* such as Stuart Sexton. Yet it also fractured partly through the inability or unwillingness of the established policy community to adapt and address the concerns that had been raised regarding the schools system. Unable to make any impact within or through the existing policy community, the milieu in which new proposals were developed was one of almost complete self-sufficiency within an extremely tight knit community of like-minded individuals. With only the very distant lighthouse figure of Mrs Thatcher, giving off the occasional beam of encouragement, individuals such as Balchin, Sexton and Letwin simply outflanked the existing policy machinery.

In a way, this methodology almost reflected completely the *modus operandi* of Mrs Thatcher herself, relying on small groups of committed and like-minded individuals. 'We were advisers with no executive powers', Sexton wrote, but 'We all worked with an almost intuitive knowledge as to what Mrs Thatcher would and would not expect'.¹² Such a strategy could not be sustained successfully over a prolonged period. In his memoirs, Geoffrey Howe reproduced a letter of complaint from John Hoskyns, Head of the Number Ten Policy Unit between 1979 and 1981. Writing in February 1980, Hoskyns provided a concise overview of the central problem that was to plague the course of education policy. 'The conclusion that I am coming to', he wrote

is that the way in which [Margaret Thatcher] herself operates, the way her fire is at present consumed, the lack of a methodical mode of working and the similar lack of orderly discussion and communication on key issues, means that our chance of implementing a carefully worked out strategy – both policy and communications – is very low indeed.¹³

The consequences of such an approach – the overuse of an ad hoc system, over reliance on what was basically 'cronyism' for outside advice, and too much dependence on sheer force of personality – were not just as regards the disruption

¹² *The Times*, 17 September 2003. Sexton was commenting on the role of special advisers during the late 1970s and early 1980s.

¹³ Howe, G. (1994) *Conflict of Loyalty*. London: Macmillan, p. 249.

caused to the education system, but also in terms of making a success of the government's own intentions at reform. This was compounded between 1986 and 1989 by Baker, whose instincts were not in line with those of his Prime Minister, and whose own similar 'lack of methodical mode' further exacerbated the drift towards confusion and conflict.

Despite their apparent success, particularly up to 1987, the dilemma for the *irregulars* appeared at the point within the policy process when the detail of their proposals had to be elucidated. They had lobbied extremely successfully as a self-contained 'issue network' to by-pass the existing policy machinery in formulating their proposals. Yet, as James Hamilton discovered in 1976 with the follow up to the *Yellow Book*, while it might be possible to largely control the initial input to the policy process, it is much more difficult to control the process itself and its subsequent output. Here, some of the traditional partners were able to reassert some control over the output, albeit within the broad policy framework which the 1988 Reform Act represented. The other major problem for the *irregulars* as a group was that they were always easier to categorise by what they were against, rather than what they were for. Whitty suggested that the success of the New Right lay in submerging what could be called short-term contradictions in support of a project which, in the long term, could satisfy both.¹⁴ Arguably, the opposite was the case. During the crucial period from appointment of Baker to the election of 1987, the *irregulars* – both neo-liberal and neo-conservative – were content to ignore the long-term contradictions inherent in their positions in support of the short-term gain of ensuring the short-term political triumph of the 1987 manifesto proposals. Subsequently, although they would remain united in their distaste for the education establishment, they were never able to reconcile their diametrically-opposed views on policy.

Neither, after 1987, would the *irregulars* retain the same degree of latitude in devising policy with the much more interventionist and aggressively ambitious Kenneth Baker, as described by David Hancock, at 'the top of his game'. 'Education policy', reflected one Permanent Secretary who worked with four successive Secretaries of State, 'was more driven by political egos than a

¹⁴ Whitty in Willan, 'The National Curriculum', p. 36.

concern for the educational needs of children'.¹⁵ Baker was the extreme example of the primacy of politics. According to Eric Forth, Baker's PPS at the DES, even with all the initiatives beginning to pile up, 'At the morning "prayer meetings" of his team the main issue was media handling'.¹⁶ A small, but enormously significant and symbolic development after Baker's appointment was his replacement of Stuart Sexton by Tony Kerpel as his special adviser. This was not so much in the sense of the individuals involved, but it signified the replacement of a specialist education adviser with a completely political figure, whose loyalty and expertise was in furthering his minister's career.¹⁷ This was equally true for advisers at whatever level in government. Acting as advocates for their minister, they exacerbated the tendency towards political and personal egocentricity when dealing with policy. As described by Sexton: 'Now they (advisers) have evolved into political back-watchers, who go from department from department with Ministers, both facing problems they are unfamiliar with. They are now part of the problem they were meant to help overcome in the first place'.¹⁸

When the sheer scale of what Baker eventually proposed is examined, one cannot but admire the personal artifice, but the unforeseen consequence of this was the instability of the edifice whose construction he had so deftly supervised. Nowhere was this more evident than with the National Curriculum. While its eventual form and content owed much to Baker, the idea of a national curriculum had much less far to travel than that of Grant Maintained schools in order to reach centre stage. 'The arguments of the right and the contributions of parents to the education debate', said one Deputy Secretary, 'all stacked up very well with the political impetus, while the Department embraced strongly the

¹⁵ Caines interview. John Caines joined the Department in 1989 while Kenneth Baker was still in post. He left in 1992, early into John Patten's term, having served under John MacGregor and Kenneth Clarke in the interim.

¹⁶ Forth interview.

¹⁷ Special advisers have gone on to achieve a notoriety all of their own under Labour since 1997. 'Their role is no longer to defeat the Civil Service but to see off other ministers and their proxies', wrote the late Hugo Young, 'As a class they've become a self-justifying, yet also mutually destructive, excrescence'. *The Guardian*, 7 July 1998.

¹⁸ Sexton interview. In terms of their actual advice, Peter Hennessey described their role as too often merely acting as 'comfort blankets', expressing what their minister wished to hear. Peter Hennessey interview, 27 November 1998.

centralising tendencies of the 1980s'.¹⁹ While Baker was keen to disparage the contribution his fellow Cabinet members might have made to education policy, one irony was that Baker allowed himself to be swayed by his own personal preferences as regards what he thought students should be studying, as opposed to what the system could actually stand. While Baker always saw the National Curriculum as his main legacy, the supreme irony in all of this may well be that the Baker National Curriculum will soon be seen as a colossal waste of time, an aberration. With the steady roll back of compulsory subjects, combined with the attempted introduction of a strong vocational element into the curriculum in secondary schools, it may be the 'third way' of Keith Joseph that will be seen as the one nearest to addressing the needs of the majority of students.

If Baker's longer-term legacy remains ambiguous, the immediate legacy to his successors was much more apparent. It was Baker who provided the template for the high-profile, publicity-conscious and interventionist minister. It was also Baker who was willing to ignore, or not to ignore, the previous policy 'partners' for his own political ends. The contrast with previous landmark education legislation, such as that of 1944, could not have been starker. 'There was a very elaborate consultation procedure', said Jenny Bacon of the 1988 Act, 'but it happened after the Bill had become law and not before'.²⁰ Baker was fortunate in that he was able to preside over the initial period of reform during which he could ride roughshod over the education community. While this could not continue indefinitely if the reforms were to be implemented, he did not remain long enough at education to suffer the consequences of his ambitions. None of his Conservative successors, except possibly Kenneth Clarke, came close to managing their brief, their officials, and their careers with same degree of success and brio. Not that Baker's successors ever felt much ownership or commitment, ideological or otherwise, to his reforms.

While ideological ambiguities and practical difficulties were certainly factors in the difficulties experienced by successive Secretaries of State, the nature of their appointments and their political background were the more potent factors. The appointment of Secretaries of State for Education after 1979 appeared to follow a fairly unsophisticated pattern whereby each new incumbent

¹⁹ Hedger interview.

was appointed on the basis of the main weakness of the previous incumbent. Thus, Carlisle, thought to be lacking in gravitas and ideological commitment, was followed by Keith Joseph. The politically maladroit Keith Joseph was succeeded by Baker, who was succeeded by the more pragmatic and hands-on MacGregor. He, in turn, was followed by the robust and combative Clarke. The 'specialist', John Patten, then succeeded Clarke, to be followed in turn by the emollient and unthreatening Gillian Shephard. From start to finish, it was hard to discern any sense that they were engaged in a common endeavour with their political predecessors, let alone the educationists. Their *regular* advisers struggled to implement what they had been asked to by one set of ministers in the face of assaults from different sets of ministers, who thought and behaved as if they were 'outsiders', whose misfortune it was to have inherited someone else's *folie de grandeur*.

In some respects, successive Secretaries of State were representative of a particular historical culture within the Conservative Party. For much of its history, the Conservative Party was perceived, and operated quite deliberately, as the non-ideological Party. It saw itself as the natural party of government and was quite happy to adopt its stance to accommodate electoral success. Dogmatism was an alien creed, whereas traditional Conservative principles or approaches, such as pragmatism, scepticism or the 'one nation' tradition were traits to be cherished. Mrs Thatcher, as described by William Keegan, may have successfully 'hijacked' the Party during the 1970s with her brand of 'economic evangelicalism' and 'populist authoritarianism', but her acolytes remained a minority within the Party and were never numerically strong enough to make the hoped-for difference across the broad swathe of government policies. John Hoskyns had sensed this quite early on during the first Thatcher administration and resigned from the Policy Unit in 1982, frustrated at working in Whitehall. 'Difficult problems', he argued, 'are only solved – if they can be solved at all – by people who desperately want to solve them'.²¹ Conservatism by itself was not enough and if the Conservatives really wanted to be a radical, reforming

²⁰ Bacon interviewed in Davies-Griffith, 'The development of education policy', p. 184.

²¹ Hoskyns, J. (1982) 'Whitehall and Westminster: An Outsider's View', *Fiscal Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 3. p. 145.

government, 'I am convinced that the people and the organisation are indeed wrong'.²²

Prior to the 1987 election, a small minority of committed activists, drawn from across the *irregulars* and *politicos*, displayed the fervency to which Hoskyns referred, and proved highly effective in providing the broad outlines of policy proposals. But they failed to convince the majority of their own Party, never mind the broader political and professional support necessary to translate those proposals into effective policies. With the ironic exception of Keith Joseph, no Education Secretary since 1979, could remotely have been described as 'Thatcherite'. All would have fitted quite comfortably into any of the post-war, pragmatic, Conservative administrations, and some, such as Clarke and Baker were overtly hostile to the more extreme tenets of Thatcherism. Although they may have inherited policies that were ideological in their origins, successive Secretaries of State relied more on their personal instincts, ambitions and prejudices than any ideological lodestar.

In commenting on how some ministers were increasingly referring in speeches to their personal educational experiences, McCulloch described this development as the 'privatising of the past'. It was a process that 'has exerted an increasing influence on education policy in the 1980s and 1990s', and, the author suggested, was used to buttress various ideological arguments for education policies.²³ Part of the argument in this thesis was that, for much of the period, the reverse relationship held true, with personal experiences and personal ambitions playing the primary, and not the subsidiary, role in the course of policies. The clashes and inconsistencies that this engendered were the rocks on which Conservative attempts at reform floundered, with the end result being, in the words of one of those practitioners of 'literacy to a fault', a set of reforms that were 'well conceived, poorly designed and appallingly implemented'.²⁴

Not that the officials themselves were entirely blameless over accusations of, at the very least, selective sabotage. Many were as eager to gather more power to the centre as they were to thwart what they felt were any hostile or

²² Hoskyns, J. (1984) 'Conservatism is not enough', *Political Quarterly*, Vol. 55, No. 1, p. 4.

²³ McCulloch, G. (1997) 'Privatising the Past? History and Education Policy in the 1990s.' *British Journal of Educational Studies*, Vol. 45, No. 1, March, p. 69.

²⁴ Owen interview.

threatening initiatives. In so doing, many Civil Servants like to see their role as some sort of ‘constitutional ballast’, steering the direction of policy toward the ‘middle ground’, as well as a straightforward defence - or expansion - of their departmental fiefdoms. That the Civil Service has any right to try and guide governments away from the path of radicalism and towards a ‘common ground’ is highly questionable. As one Whitehall watcher has remarked, ‘If political polarisation or radicalism is a fact of political life, then seeking the “common ground” is not a non political position’.²⁵ It was also not very edifying to compare and contrast the zeal some officials applied to stifling those aspects of policy - such as the voucher and Grant Maintained schools – with which they were not in sympathy, with their over zealousness in pursuing their own preferred policies, such as the National Curriculum.²⁶ Michael Barber, then with the National Union of Teachers, described how ‘In the old days before the National Curriculum. . .[the DES] was staffed, or so it seemed, by serious, pragmatic, generally grey-haired, sober, career Civil Servants’. But when the gift of a national curriculum at long last fell into their laps, a ‘new breed’ emerged who were ‘young (or maybe I had just aged) and ideologically committed to the government agenda. At meetings they turned up and ended debates not through the quality of their argument, but by saying ‘Ministers could not countenance’.²⁷

For a variety of personal, political and professional reasons, there was an almost complete absence of trust between Baker’s successors and their *regular* advisers. In a colourful comment that could have applied at several times during the course of the reforms, when the reformers felt that their ideas were being sabotaged, Dominic Morris recalled that ‘There was a feeling that the Civil

²⁵ G. Fry, *The Changing Civil Service* (London, George Allen & Unwin, 1985), p. 27.

²⁶ One particularly unsavoury episode involving Nick Stuart was the rubbishing of the National Council for Educational Standards report, *Standards in English Schools*, authored by John Marks and Caroline Cox. An editorial in *The Times* concluded that ‘this example of a commitment by Civil Servants to particular policies that brook no dissent has lately pushed position-taking beyond the bounds of acceptability’. *The Times*, 8 December 1983. For Cox and Marks’ version of events see Cox, C. and Marks, J. (1988) *The Insolence of Office; Education and the Civil Servants*. London: Claridge Press.

²⁷ Barber, M. (1996) *The Learning Game. Arguments for an Education Revolution*. London: Gollancz, p. 167. In his study of the origins of the binary system and the role of officials, Godwin suggests that Barber’s contemporary observations of officials merely recorded a difference of style rather than substance: ‘One may admire the intellectual brilliance and word-skills that were the hallmark of the old-style civil servant; but their *modus operandi* was no less arrogant than that of the new breed’. Godwin, C.D. ‘The Origins of the Binary System’, *History of Education*, 1998, Vol. 27, No. 2, p. 189.

Service bastards were doing it deliberately. They were intelligent people so they must know what they are doing'.²⁸ Nor was this lack of personal trust confined to ministers and officials. Ministers within the Department often did not trust each other. Rarely did the Prime Minister trust his or her Secretary of State. Nobody trusted the teachers. This milieu of paranoia, this 'poisonous politics of education',²⁹ as described by one official, reached its apotheosis under John Major with damaging consequences for both John Patten and Gillian Shephard. Over-dependent, as it was, on the strength of individual personalities, the ambitious edifice of reform was over-hastily constructed and became a veritable Babel of conflicting views, loyalties and shifting priorities with personal prejudices and professional ambitions often clashing with and overriding ideological or educational priorities. The end result was, appropriately, the same as John Major's description of what was happening in the Conservative Party at large, with the participants 'forming a circular firing squad and opening fire'.³⁰

'The Paris writ'

Some issues merit further study. Former HMCI, Eric Bolton, told one researcher how 'Towards the end of my time a group of senior people moved into the Department who had no previous history in education. They didn't mind what the policies were as long as the ministers wanted them to work'.³¹ In chapter nine we saw also how one senior official was moved for being too closely associated with the Grant Maintained schools policy. As the official papers are released, it would be interesting to revisit aspects of 'power and politics' within the Department and examine to what degree it became politicised internally over the course of the Conservative administrations, and how this may have effected the approach of the Labour administrations since 1997.

The lessons which the new Labour team may have learned from the Conservative administrations between 1979 and 1997 are also worthy of further

²⁸ Morris interview. One official who joined the Department with no previous involvement in education found that 'I was seen (by ministers and their advisers) as a member of the "education establishment" five minutes after joining'. Owen interview.

²⁹ Owen interview.

³⁰ Seldon, *Major*, p. 383.

³¹ Quoted in Davies-Griffith, 'The development of education policy', p. 237.

investigation. For a relatively long period, there was a conscious and determined effort by the Labour government to present a much more united and committed front to the public. Within education, one Deputy Secretary described how 'There is immense control of presentation, not to let stories break, and there is enormous pressure to keep the lid on'.³² In terms of personalities, the appointment of a senior figure such as David Blunkett also negated against the suspicion and mistrust of the Conservative years.³³ The intervention and influence of the Prime Minister's Policy Unit was something that only gained in significance under Labour. According to Blunkett's special adviser, Conor Ryan, of key importance was the 'close working relationship with Number 10 especially between myself and David Miliband (Head of the Policy Unit), and between Blunkett and Blair'.³⁴

Within Labour's education policies since 1997, there remain strong under-currents from both wings of the Conservative reformers. While any clear model or even a distinctive rationale for policy-making at the centre remains elusive, alongside the obvious and increasing centralisation, there is also the continued emphasis on standards, choice and specialisation. As regards the former, one dilemma associated with this strategy is that, as described by Rhodes, the policy networks that tend to characterise policy making can exhibit a 'dynamic conservatism' when confronted with change, acting as a brake on radical proposals. Writing in 1992, Rhodes had characterised the 'all too common experience' of the Conservative administrations across a range of policy areas as 'A pattern of authoritative pronouncements followed by policy slippage in implementation. . . .'³⁵ As with the Conservative attempts at reform, Labour may find that their reach may also far exceed their grasp. A British general told

³² Owen interview. Nick Tate, by then chair of the QCA, discovered his freedom to speak out sharply curtailed by the arrival of Labour. 'There was a powerful media manipulation machine', said Tate. When the QCA advised ministers not to cut back the primary school curriculum and defended the decision publicly, he was taken aside and told he had blotted his copybook: 'From then on the quango was effectively muzzled. We were more cautious about giving advice that they didn't want to hear'. Interview in *TES*, 27 July 2001.

³³ According to Peter Owen, 'Blunkett is a powerful icon in Labour. While it is plausible that Baroness Blatch was a minder for John Patten it is not at all plausible that someone like Stephen Byers was one for David Blunkett'. Blunkett was also supported by the effective relationship he had forged with Conor Ryan, his special adviser: 'Conor Ryan is a very effective operator, a Praetorian Guard, and would not allow anyone to undermine Blunkett'. Owen interview.

³⁴ Conor Ryan interview, 23 January 1998.

³⁵ Rhodes, 'Changing Intergovernmental Relations', p. 74.

Lloyd George regarding the deliberations of the peacemakers in the Quai d'Orsay after WW1 that, 'The root of evil is that the *Paris writ does not run*'.³⁶ While Labour was willing to be much more interventionist than the Conservatives, a tendency which saw the centralisation evident since 1976 become even more rampant post-1997, they may also inevitably discover that 'the Paris writ' will not run.

As regards the latter, more-market orientated aspects of policy, these, in particular, are likely to continue to be highly contentious. Such proposals go against the grain of much of traditional Labour.³⁷ While the Conservatives could draw from the 'sheltered pools' of economic liberalism within their tradition to help buttress a free-market stance to schools, there are no such 'pools' available in Labour. Yet Hoskyns' analysis of the problems that faced the Conservative reformers are equally applicable to those within Labour. Arguably, the Labour 'modernisers' hijacked the Party to the equivalent degree that the 'Thatcherites' had hijacked the Conservative Party. As Labour now prepares the groundwork for its tilt at a third term, with the memories of the wilderness years in opposition fading from memory, the search for new, radical policies can only exacerbate the latent conflict between 'old' and 'New' Labour.

The fact remains that the process of successfully implementing reforms in education is so diffuse, and relies so heavily on a myriad of individual and collective decisions and perceptions, taken at various levels in the system, that no diktat from the centre can succeed unless there is some sense of agreement or some sense of joint venture between those involved. Heclo and Wildavsky's verdict on the 'supreme skill' of those individuals they met when examining the Treasury, was that it lay 'in personal relations. When they succeed where others fail, it is because they recognise the overriding importance of giving and getting a personal commitment. Bringing colleagues along with you makes sense...British Treasury men know that their desires cannot prevail unless they

³⁶ Macmillan, M. (2001) *Peacemakers. The Paris Conference of 1919 and Its Attempt to End War*. London: John Murray, p. 7.

³⁷ When Gordon Brown pointedly referred only to 'Labour' and not once to 'New Labour' is his Conference speech in 2003, it was as much a coded criticism of Blair and his preferred policies, as had been the attacks of old Tories such Ian Gilmour and Francis Pym during the Thatcher years when they spoke of the 'One Nation' tradition.

maintain a community to support them'.³⁸ This was something with which few of those determined to reform the schools system between 1976 and 1997 ever managed to engage.

³⁸ Heclo and Wildavsky, *Private Government of Public Money*, p. lxiv-v.

APPENDIX

Sample interview schedules

1. Interview with Tessa Keswick at offices of CPS– special adviser to Kenneth Clarke, and now Director of CPS

How did you become an adviser?

What did you feel the job entailed prior to becoming an adviser? How if at all did that differ from your experience as an adviser?

What might the ‘job specification’ be for the post of adviser?

On joining a new department, how do you and obviously the Minister as well, start about briefing yourselves on the issues unless you rely entirely on permanent officials, which may not be ideal or desirable?

You described your time at Health as like being ‘in the trenches’. How would describe your time at Education?

Throughout the period at which I am looking at, there did appear to be occasions when there was a misunderstanding of what was expected from a new Minister. John MacGregor and Gillian Shepherd’s apparent conflicts with No. 10 were cases in point. That did not happen with Kenneth Clark. Was this because he was, politically, in a very strong position, or did he have clear brief on being appointed? What did you see as his brief?

In your article in the Daily Telegraph in June 96, you were pretty scathing about the role of the civil servants within the DES, describing them as ‘saboteurs’, and being ‘ideologically driven’. What would you say was the ideological position of the civil servants?

Where would you locate ‘power’ within the dept among the civil servants? You mentioned the permanent secretary in your article, but some accounts have the deputy and under secretaries as the chief protagonists within the department?

In terms of policy making during Kenneth Clark’s time at the DES, some initiatives were ongoing, some appeared to come through quite quickly during his time there. Of the main issues - reforming HMI, teacher training, primary teaching methods, reforming the curriculum and examination councils, publication of results, the parents charter – how would you characterise how these issues became important or prominent?

Who would you see as having a significant impact on discussions about these policies within and also outside the DES, e.g. Anthony O Hear was perceived to be particularly influential on teacher training, John Marks on the reform of the NCC, etc.

One of the key roles of advisers during the period appears to have been as a conduit for alternative advice. Speaking to Dr. John Marks recently, he suggested that if someone such as himself wants to try and have an input into policy discussions, unless they can contact the minister directly, they need someone such as an adviser to let them know what is being talked about, what is on the agenda, and also feed alternative views and opinions back to the minister. How important was this aspect of your role in the light of the opposition of civil servants?

Duncan Graham recently wrote that although he was aware that Kenneth Clark was unhappy with the work of the NCC, he was never called in for 'a rational discussion' with the Minister about the problems. Clive Saville, one of the civil servants who was moved sideways because of conflicts over the reform of teacher training said something similar in that he knew Kenneth Clark was taking outside advice but he was not given the chance to discuss or debate that advice with the advisers or the minister. The implication is that 'official' advice was not being sought or ignored, or both, in favour of more overt political advice. Is this accurate or are they being entirely disingenuous in their interpretation of events?

Kenneth Clark is perceived as having moved to the 'right' during his time at Education. Was there a happy marriage between political expediency in terms of positioning himself favourably with the right of the party, and his own personal convictions and approach?

Despite the political prominence given to education between 1979 and 1997, it can appear that there were many slogans but little practical depth to Conservative education policy in that individual Secretaries of State had enormous scope to focus on the bits that they thought needed mending at the time? Is this a fair representation?

Was this a strength or a weakness? Would some of the reforms, such as grant maintained schools, have gone deeper if there had been stronger and continuous central direction, as appears to be being attempted by the present administration?

You were appointed to the CPS in Oct 95. What did you see as the CPS' role at the time?

What do you see as the CPS' role now?

With regard to education, it appeared that the CPS and others were left out of the loop and John Major took an intensely personal interest in education policy and policy tended to be formulated with the Policy Unit, the SMF/Robert Skidelsky, and very few others. There was distrust and antagonism between him/them and Gillian Shephard and her adviser Elizabeth Cotterell?

Why do you think Barber et al were able to do quite quickly so many of the things Conservatives talked about?

2. Interview with **Peter Owen** in Sanctuary Buildings - (Head of Economic and Domestic Affairs Secretariat, Cabinet Office, 1990-94; Deputy Secretary with responsibility for School Curriculum and Teachers, 1994-5; Director General for Schools 1995-98)

Were you involved in education as part of the Cabinet Office?...as part of back to basics?

How much did education get caught up in the J Major's need to establish a political agenda for himself? Someone like E Bolton would argue that the coup de grace for HMI was prompted by the Citizens Charter?

What was your impression of the department from outside it? Often maligned as being separate from mainstream of Whitehall..full of lifers...people with very strong positions of their own?

How did you find the department when you moved? G Holland said it had plenty of people who could write very high class briefs but knew very little or had little experience on the ground as it were which in many ways led to the furore over the testing arrangements the previous year?

Is there a 'brief' as it were on being appointed in Whitehall in general and in education? You took over from John Vereker...he was reported to have badly underestimated the mood of teachers...was described as 'thatcherite before his time'?

You joined at an interesting time. Geoffrey Holland had recently left after disagreements with John Patten. Nick Stuart had been moved. Clive Saville and John Wiggins before that. There was a new Permanent Secretary, Tim Lankester who was unfamiliar with education. What were the main policy issues/priorities?

With responsibility for schools, what were the main priorities of flashpoints when you joined?

J Patten's last six months appeared to have been used in fighting unloved and unwanted policy proposals such as curbing of the NUS and Teacher training ?

How did you find working with J Patten?

Who do you think he was listening to, taking advice from outside the dept? MacGregor had the 'Scottish mafia', K Clarke had O'Hear, J Marks etc..?

One of the main tensions within department appears to be between junior ministers, who held the ear of the Prime Minister, and the Secretary of State. This was a feature under Mrs Thatcher and also with regard to Lady Blatch and J Patten?

There didn't seem to be that problem with G Shephard and her ministers although it was almost like the middle man was cut out and the tension was between the dept. and No 10 direct as it were?

G Shephard appeared to have a clear brief from J Major to calm things down which she managed to do very quickly. How is that kind of shift in gear conveyed to senior officials...do you know in advance...what signals are sent out?

Very quickly stories appeared that G Shephard had fallen out of favour...was too much of a consolidator...and there were some very public rows and set backs over vouchers, publication of results etc...What were her options?

Who do you think she listened to? What is your opinion on the role of special advisers?

How much do you feel she was undermined by the Policy Unit and J Major in that there was the Birmingham speech that she clearly wasn't aware of although Chris Woodhead was?

Do you feel or did you feel that the role of the policy unit is in initiating policy e.g. was someone like Nick True or Dominic Morris or Sean Williams making proposals, or is the role of the Policy Unit more of a conduit?

It is easy to get the names of the prominent people from the papers such as True etc., but they only say a very influential person was so-and-so. How does their influence manifest itself? Do they visit the dept and have discussion with officials? Do you have any contact?

In working on policies whatever they are when such clear political signals are coming out of No 10 for one course, how difficult does that make the dept officials' job?

How much did you feel that the administration had simply run out of steam, lost its way?

As a senior official in the dept. did you feel that any coherent education policy or agenda had revealed itself by 1997?

The manifesto was a real tug of war and was very retro looking, with grammar schools, increased selection and so forth. There was also rumbling on in the background talk such as from the SMF about getting more private money into education?

The Policy unit currently appears to be a key player but there appears to be certainly until now a greater degree of harmony and co-ordination between Blunkett, Barber, Ryan, Miliband now Adonis?

Is very wide of the mark to say that policy advice has been institutionalised to large degree in the Standards and Effectiveness Unit inside the dept?

There still appears to be murmurs of discontent in that Blunkett has said that officials are not doing all they should be and despite the reprieve for LEAs, Michael Bichard has said that they are also not up to speed yet?

3. Interview with Michael Fallon in House of Commons - : Parliamentary Under-Secretary at the DES, 1990-92. Member of the No Turning Back Group.

The NTBG...what was the political context behind the founding of same....IEA reported involved...other groups putting forward policy suggestions at the time?

It was reported that the group went to see Mrs. Thatcher with your original paper and she asked you do something specific on education. Why do think that was and not on any other areas?

How was Save Our Schools prepared and where did the ideas originate? How were they formulated e.g. with the ASI, IEA, individual contributions etc?

What was your role within the ASI?

Along with yourself, several members of the NTBG went on to become junior ministers at Education – Forth, Rumbold, Howarth – how do you think they performed in the light of where they were coming from?

You were the only one who really ‘walked it like you talked it’ when you went to education?

Who else would you rate as influential in framing the education proposals in the 88 Act?

How close a contact did you keep with what happened between 86 and 90 when you were appointed to the DfE, and what was your perception as to what happened?

The supply side proposals – lms etc – were implemented to a certain extent but it appears that Baker and civil servants were able to stamp their own imprint on the curriculum? Was this due to a lack of clear or distinct Conservative policy on education or the curriculum in particular?

MacGregor appears on the one hand to have been sold a bit of a pup in that the talk at the time was all of consolidation and bedding down and so forth, but very quickly he was totally adrift from what certainly the PM was thinking and the right and centre right of the party. Do you think he misinterpreted his brief, or there was ambiguity in what he was expected to do?

What was the role of the NCC? SEAC?

Clearly when you and T Eggar were appointed you were there to put some backbone some rigour in the implementation of the policies. Was that how the job was offered to you?

Why is it that apart from perhaps Keith Joseph, Education Secretaries have never really been ‘one of us’ and always had to be balanced by more sympathetic junior ministers?

What were the main obstacles you found in your time in the dept.?

How were the civil servants?

Apart from your own instincts and beliefs, ministers seem to draw on outside advisers of their preference. In K Clarke's time people like O Hear and Sheila Lawlor had quite a contribution to make. How did you find policy or advice was being taken? Were civil servants outside the loop? Or part of...

Eleanor Laing was MacGregor's adviser and Tessa Keswick was K Clarke's. What did you perceive their role as advisers to be and what kind of contribution do you think they made?

John Major seem to take or have the time to take a more personal interest in education but seemed to have confined his advice to a very small group of people, much more so than Mrs. Thatcher. Was that your impression?

Robert Skidelsky / the SMF was one source, the CPS another, but J Major never really seems to have found anyone with his set of preferences. Skidelsky wasn't keen on grammar schools etc. People at the Policy Unit appeared from the outside to have the sympathy of the PM but was that their contribution or do they say what the PM wants to hear?

While there was a preference for market forces and a antagonism towards the education establishment, was there a coherent Conservative education policy?

Were successive Secs. of State allowed to plough their own furrow which led to rows and confusions e.g. Baker and Mrs. Thatcher, G Shephard and J Major?

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15. **Sean Williams:** Downing Street Policy Unit, 1995-97, *17 October 2000*.

Regulars

16. **Jennifer Bacon:** Under Secretary, School Curriculum and Exams, DES, 1986-89, *28 May 1998*.
17. **Eric Bolton:** Senior Chief Inspector of Schools, 1983-1991, *3 August 1998*.
18. **John Caines:** Permanent Secretary, DFE, 1989-93, *14 July 1998*.
19. **David Forrester:** Assistant Secretary DES 1979-1985; Under Secretary DES/DFEE 1988-1994; Director of Further Education and Youth Training 1995-2001, *24 April 2002*.
20. **James Hamilton:** Permanent Secretary, DES, 1976-83, *12 August 1998 & 14 August 2000*.
21. **David Hancock:** Permanent Secretary, DES, 1983-89, *4 June 1998*.
22. **John Hedger:** Director of Operations, 1995-2000 ; Deputy Secretary, Department for Education, 1992-95; Under Secretary, DES, 1988-92, *18 February 1999*.
23. **Geoffrey Holland:** Permanent Secretary, DFE, 1993-94, *19 August 1998*.
24. **Peter Owen:** Deputy Secretary, DFEE, 1994-95; Director General for Schools, DFEE, 1995-98, *27 August 1998*.
25. **Clive Saville:** Under Secretary DES/DFE, 1987-97, *14 January 1998*.
26. **Nicholas Tate:** Chief Executive, Qualifications and Curriculum Authority 1997-2000, *25 February 2000*.
27. **Walter Ulrich:** Deputy Secretary, DES, 1976-89, *7 November 1998 (Correspondence.)*.

Politicos

28. **Kenneth Baker:** Secretary of State for Education, 1986-89, *17 November 1998*.
29. **Tessa Blackstone:** Opposition Spokesman , House of Lords on education and science, 1988-92; Minister of State, DFEE, 1997-2001, *27 August 1998*.
30. **Emily Blatch:** Minister of State, DFEE, 1992-94; Opposition Spokesmen, House of Lords on education and employment, 1997-2000, *28 October 1998*.
31. **Rhodes Boyson:** Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Education, 1979-83; member of NCES, FEVER, Black Paper author/co-editor, *25 January 1994*.
32. **Robert Dunn:** Parliamentary Under Secretary at the DES, 1983-88, *31 January 1994*.
33. **Michael Fallon:** Parliamentary Under Secretary at the DES, 1990-92. Member of the No Turning Back Group, *17 February 1998*.
34. **Eric Forth:** Parliamentary Under Secretary of State, 1992-94, DFE; Minister of State, DFEE, 1994-97; Member of the No Turning Back Group, *20 July 1998*.
35. **Tony Kerpel:** Special Adviser to Kenneth Baker, 1985-1992, *23 November 1998*.
36. **Tessa Keswick:** Special Adviser to Kenneth Clarke, 1989-95; Director Centre for Policy Studies, since 1995, *7 May 1998*.
37. **Eleanor Laing:** Special Adviser to John MacGregor, 1989-94, *5 March 1998*.
38. **John MacGregor:** Secretary of State for Education, 1989-1990. *15 November 2000*.

39. **Angela Rumbold:** Minister of State, DES, 1986-90; Member of the No Turning Back Group, *27 October 1998*.
40. **Conor Ryan:** Special Adviser to David Blunkett, 1995-2001, *23 January 1998*.

Commentators and academics

41. **Mike Baker:** BBC Education Correspondent since 1988, *13 August 1999*.
42. **Michael Barber:** Head of the Standards and Effectiveness Unit, DfEE, 1997-2001, *24 November 1998*.
43. **John Clare:** Education correspondent, *The Times*, 1986-88; Education editor, *The Daily Telegraph* since 1988, *14 November 1998*.
44. **Peter Hennessy:** Professor of Government, Queen Mary and Westfield College, *27 November 1998*.
45. **Denis Lawton:** Professor of Education, Institute of Education, *26 October 2000*.
46. **Geoff Whitty:** Director, Institute of Education since 2000, *29 May 1998*.
47. **Peter Wilby:** Education Editor, *The Independent*, 1986-89; Editor, *New Statesman* since 1998, *25 February 1998*.

The following were unwilling or unable to be interviewed:

Kenneth Clarke
Elizabeth Cotterell
Duncan Graham
Brian Griffiths
Phillip Halsey
John Major
John Patten
Gillian Shephard
Nicholas Stewart
Nicholas True

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b) Newspapers and periodicals

The Independent

The Times

The Guardian

The Telegraph

The Sunday Times

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The Daily Mail

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Times Educational Supplement (TES)

Education

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